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Remediation as reading: digitising *The Western Home Monthly*

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This paper serves as a report from the field in the midst of the collaborative digitisation of The Western Home Monthly *(1899–1932), a Winnipeg-based middlebrow magazine. It reflects on the methodological and theoretical challenges that face periodical scholars and on how those challenges are sometimes addressed and sometimes exacerbated by digitisation. Most importantly, it explores the unique reading perspective afforded by the process of digitising an archive, and asks how this process might help to develop new methodologies for reading periodicals that are more attentive to the media-specificity of the middlebrow magazine.*

Keywords: archives; digitisation; middlebrow; periodical studies; remediation

Introduction

In December of 2013, I travelled to the Manitoba Legislative Library in Winnipeg to visit an archive I had been writing about for some time: the complete run of *The Western Home Monthly*, a household magazine published out of Winnipeg between 1899 and 1932. My focus was on one year in particular – 1925, the year that the magazine serialised the now-classic prairie novel *Wild Geese* by Martha Ostenso – but, for practical reasons, I could not restrict my reading to the six issues in which *Wild Geese* appears. Along with my collaborator, Dr Paul Hjartarson, I was there to begin the process of organising the magazine's digitisation. The University of Alberta Libraries, in collaboration with the Manitoba Legislative Library and the Editing Modernism in Canada project at the University of Alberta (EMiC UA), are seeking not only to digitise the magazine's 33-year run, but also to render it fully searchable through a combination of OCR'd text and metadata markup that distinguishes between individual items within a page image. The magazine will become part of the *Peel's Prairie Provinces* digital collection, which includes, as of summer 2013, 'approximately 7,500 digitised books, over 66,000 newspaper issues (4.8 million articles!), 16,000 postcards, and 1,000

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maps'.[1] *The Western Home Monthly* will be the first magazine to join this robust digital collection. We were there in search of necessary information including page counts, completeness of the holdings, condition of the print copies and ratio of black-and-white to colour pages.

This visit mixed the pleasures of encountering the physical object for the first time – of simply turning its pages, stumbling across humorous bits of content or the surprise of an article clipped out by some past reader – with the effort to document key features of the archive through a series of photographs. My own goal, that of finally seeing *Wild Geese* in the context of its first Canadian publication,[2] was complicated by my responsibility to the digitisation project that forced my attention beyond those select issues. Between us we photographed every cover and table of contents available, in addition to any references we found to circulation numbers, subscription practices and costs. In the process, my focus on *Wild Geese* was sidelined by attention to the archive as a whole – attention that, as this paper will demonstrate, has reshaped my understanding of the middlebrow magazine as an object of study.

While my interest in Ostenso was the starting point of this collaborative endeavour, it quickly became evident to everyone involved that *The Western Home Monthly* is a valuable piece of Canadian cultural history with potentially wide public interest. Produced by the Home Publishing Co. Ltd, a subsidiary of the Stovel Printing Company, this 'National magazine for the urban home'[3] saw a steady increase in circulation throughout its run. While it began as a modest local agricultural publication, by 1924 circulation had increased to 55,0000 and spread beyond the province of Manitoba. By 1929, the April cover could announce: 'This Issue Read by 100,000 Families.' In 1932, in a bid to increase their national readership, the Home Publishing Co. renamed the magazine *The National Home Monthly* and opened offices in Toronto, a move that saw the circulation increase to 180,000, at which point it was described by *Time* as the most widely circulated of Canada's 'Big Five' magazines (alongside *Chatelaine* and *Maclean's*) and as 'a countrified *Delineator*'.[4] For the 32 years prior to this shift, *The Western Home Monthly* released 12 issues a year, each issue containing as few as 40 or as many as 100 pages. As the technological infrastructure at the Stovel Printing Company increased, so too did the range of content in their main household magazine, as well as their range of other published materials. Indeed, *The Western Home Monthly* served in part as promotion for its parent company's other services, both in the form of explicit advertisements for maps and department store catalogues printed by Stovel, and in the form of the increasing incorporation of printing techniques that spoke to the company's sophistication as a modern printer.[5]

This 32-year run, however, encapsulates not only shifts in print technologies and distribution channels; it also encompasses a range of content that speaks to vital historical and cultural contexts, from editorials on immigration policies and labour politics to opinion pieces on women's education and employment. Taken as a whole, then, the almost 400 issues of *The Western Home Monthly*, comprising roughly 20,000 pages of material that runs the gamut from advertisement to illustration to editorial to fiction, constitute one of those 'vast and unwieldy archives' that characterise the particular excitements and challenges of periodical studies. As Sean Latham and Robert Scholes point out, periodical scholars have often 'focused on small magazines with short print runs or on single themes or motifs in larger periodicals' as a means of managing these enormous archives.[6] The question of how to engage with a long run of a middlebrow magazine remains a much-debated and unresolved methodological concern – one currently being faced by the scholars, librarians and archivists involved in the digitisation

of *The Western Home Monthly*'s complete run. As large-scale digitisation projects such as this one continue,[7] the time is ripe to contemplate how digitisation allows us to rethink our reading of the magazine as a form characterised by the complex interplay of seriality and hypermediacy, a key dimension of the form that, particularly in the case of the middlebrow magazine, challenges familiar literary critical modes of reading. This paper serves as a report from the field in the midst of a digitisation project; it reflects on the methodological and theoretical challenges that face periodical scholars and on how those challenges are sometimes addressed and sometimes exacerbated by digitisation. Most importantly, it explores the unique reading perspective afforded by the process of digitising an archive, and asks how the process of digitisation might help to develop new methodologies for reading periodicals that are more attentive to the media-specificity of the middlebrow magazine.

In a recent online opinion piece on the anthropology of reverse engineering, Nick Seaver describes the structuralist impulse to 'interpret objects by decomposing them into parts and then recomposing those parts into new wholes', but warns against the assumption that this activity can ever be objective: 'When you break an object down into its parts and put it back together again, you have not simply copied it – you've made something new.'[8] Structuralist analysis, he concludes, is 'like composing a poem, and engineering is likewise expressive'. While Seaver is referring explicitly to Alexis C Madrigal's recent attempt to reverse-engineer the famously specific Netflix tags,[9] his words are equally true for digitisation as a form of creative-critical analysis that builds an argument in the process of breaking an object of study apart in order to put it back together in a different medium. The argument that building is an important form of scholarly analysis is certainly not new. In fact, it was at the centre of a heated debate over the definition of the digital humanities that began with Stephen Ramsay's talk at MLA 2011, 'Who's In and Who's Out', in which he argued that 'Digital Humanities is about building things' and that, 'if you are not making anything, you are not – in my less-than-three-minute opinion – a digital humanist'.[10] I am less interested in this sort of disciplinary border-management than in the new modes of reading made possible through the processual nature of building, particularly in terms of the seriality that is fundamental to the way that periodicals mediate their content. In order to understand the relation between reading, seriality and digitisation, however, it is first important to understand some of the central methodological challenges of periodical studies as a field.

Periodical problems

It has become a critical commonplace of periodical studies that the field's methodological challenges are fundamentally connected to its appeal: the sheer size and heterogeneity of the archives defy many established literary critical approaches. Manushag N Powell aptly summarises this conundrum: 'The variety of content, including advertisements, essays, images, letters, fiction, and reportage, that can be found inside any periodical is both a major advantage of and an obstacle to its study.' They may be 'inspiring, deeply rewarding objects of study', as Powell argues, but 'because of [their] ability to capsize and contradict, periodicals are exceptionally difficult to discuss coherently'.[11] This difficulty has led to a fragmentation and multiplication of methodological approaches. Powell endorses this methodological non-uniformity, asserting that it 'can be better, and often more fun, to start from scratch'.[12] Nevertheless, as was suggested by the impetus of the MLA 2013 roundtable discussion entitled '*What is a journal*? Towards a Theory of Periodical Studies',[13] there is some sense that a shared set of

theoretical and methodological principles would benefit the study of periodicals as a whole, if only to provide a common point of departure.

Such a sense is clearly at work in Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman's *Modernism in the Magazines: An Introduction*, which includes several chapters on the development of shared best practices in periodical studies as 'a place to start'.[14] Scholes and Wulfman offer a long list of magazine features that they encourage scholars to catalogue, and gesture toward the possibilities of a crowd-sourced magazine database that would allow researchers to cross-reference prices, audiences and circulation numbers.[15] They also offer a step-by-step guide to the study of magazines by working through a single issue of *The New Age* to demonstrate a more general method of reading that analyses the modern magazine as a cultural object rather than simply mining it for literary or artistic content. What neither their database model nor their methodological guide to magazine reading can take into account, however, is an issue that has become increasingly pertinent to periodical scholars in recent years: that of seriality or periodicity, the fact that a magazine is a recurring form.

The study of modernist magazines has arguably paid less attention to seriality because little magazines, which have dominated the field, are generally characterised by short and/or non-continuous runs as well as more frequent changes in form and editorial policies. A middlebrow publication such as *The Western Home Monthly*, however, is structured by patterns of formal continuity including recurring sections and typographical choices. James Mussell, a scholar of Victorian periodicals and digitisation, has argued that seriality is key to the function of the magazine, be it little or mass. His presentation at the aforementioned MLA roundtable centred on the claim that serial texts 'are established through the interplay of sameness and difference, where changing content is presented through a set of features that recur, issue after issue'.[16] This emphasis on the importance of the same or the repeating feature can be frustrating for literary scholars, he acknowledges, who 'are particularly susceptible to the seduction of exceptionality, the telling difference'[17] – a susceptibility that is perhaps evident in Powell's insistence on the fun of starting from scratch. Mussell's argument is in favour of attention to bibliographic codes and recurrent structures that are generally marked as supplementary in the very process of reading, which privileges content.[18] A reading attentive to formal structures, he asserts, is capable of bringing scholars closer to the social dynamic of the serial text as it unfolds across time insofar as individual issues respond both to established readerly expectations and to the perceived needs of the moment.[19] This emphasis on repetition or sameness as key to understanding the mediating structures that define a particular periodical, and differentiate it from others, constitutes a vital methodological intervention in the study of magazines that is particularly well suited to middlebrow magazines, which are easily dismissed by a reading approach that privileges difference. It also raises an important question about how periodical scholars imagine the act of scholarly reading.

The reading experience that Mussell evokes here recalls Julie Rak's description of generic writing, which 'works because the recognition of repetition is pleasurable. The act of *recognition itself* creates a measure of participation for the reader who finds similar elements.' (emphasis in original)[20] But is it really possible to engage in the same kind of pleasurable recognition that shaped the reading experience of a historical reader receiving a new issue of *The Western Home Monthly* every month? The very format of the archive, in which the entire run of the magazine is brought together in a single physical space and temporal moment, belies such a possibility. Digitisation, as I will argue below, shifts the kinds of reading approaches available in a way that can be productive as well as

dangerous. But between the diachronic experience of the historical magazine-reader and the synchronic experience of the contemporary database-user lies an intermediary space of reading enhanced by the experiential dimensions of digitisation.

As I mentioned above, during my short visit to the Manitoba Legislative Library I took hundreds of photographs in an attempt to document key features of the magazine. I am currently sorting and tagging the images from 1919 to 1932: 409 jpegs in total. As I began to work through these hundreds of files, I started transcribing the tables of contents where available (consistent tables of contents did not appear until 1922). While this kind of tedious transcription will be partially replaced by OCR – *partially*, because OCR is famously inconsistent – the wearying process of typing out the same information month after month brought home the centrality of repetition to a periodical's identity in a visceral way. As I typed the same categories again and again – 'Editorial', 'Fiction and Reality', 'Better Cookery' and so forth – I gained not only a heightened awareness of how repetition unfolds across time, but also a keen sensitivity to small variations in order, the brief disappearance and subsequent reappearance of a regular feature, or the replacement of old departments such as 'Poultry Profits' with new regular features such as 'Shadowland with all its Vagaries' as the readership of the magazine shifted in the 1930s. Sandra Gabriele has demonstrated the importance of modern media's establishment of 'new rhythms for habits of leisure that themselves responded to the change from an agrarian economy to an industrial one', rhythms that are established in '[r]ecurring features' of periodical publications that 'created predictable rhythms of consumption'.[21] The repetitions and subtle variations within *The Western Home Monthly*'s recurring features, from its regular columns to its magazine-bundling deals to its product promotions, speak to the shifting audience for the magazine in the form of an increasingly urban Western Canadian population as well as an increasingly national readership. What would be lost to me in a reading approach that privileged the unique, that sought out the canonical or the literary at the expense of the generic and repetitive, is awareness of the recurring features that give this magazine its distinctive identity. If periodical scholars want to understand how the magazine as a medium itself mediated its diverse and shifting contents, attention to repetition as the backbone of seriality is key.

It is perhaps paradoxical that the process of remediation has increased my awareness of how magazines function as media.[22] Yet, as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, remediation can be surprisingly revealing of the relationship between immediacy and hypermediacy, which they gloss as 'the transparent presentation of the real and the enjoyment of the opacity of media themselves', respectively.[23] Through the process of remediation, they explain, 'the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium', transforming the immediacy of the old into the hypermediacy of the new.[24] This revelatory dimension of remediation has a long history, from the relationship between realist painting and photography to the way digital culture has impacted film. Magazines, with their pastiche of mediated and remediated forms from photography to genre fiction to advertisements, seem to be characterised by an overt hypermediacy, but this is an anachronistic perspective. As Mussell explains, 'reading is a practice that delineates a set of structures in order to make them disappear'[25] – to make them immediate. Lisa Gitelman confirms that 'the success of all media depends at some level on inattention or "blindness" to the media technologies themselves (and all of their supporting protocols) in favor of attention to the phenomena, "the content," that they represent for users' edification or enjoyment'.[26] But the kind of reading involved in remediation can work against this inattention, delineating structures in order to make them reappear, denaturalising that media in the process of

changing it. Thus the process of remediation in the form of digitisation makes possible a heightened attention to 'the very real changes and limitations that occur as … "data" moves across forms, formats and media',[27] in the process revealing something about the media on both ends of this transformation.

Digitising the archive

When I sat down in the Manitoba Legislative Library intending to look no further than the six issues in which *Wild Geese* was serialised, I was participating in a reading blind to media technology, a reading in search of content and novelty. The digitisation of *The Western Home Monthly* cannot eliminate this kind of media blindness, however, and, as with all forms of digitisation, also invites its own set of theoretical problems. The increasing reliance of periodical studies on digital technology, while pivotal to the expansion of the field, has also led to certain methodological biases informed by the affordances of available technologies. The widespread use of OCR overlaid on page images privileges text-based technologies such as markup, keyword searches and visualisation tools such as Voyant. I am not arguing that keyword searches and text visualisation do not have their benefits. Latham has demonstrated convincingly the hermeneutic potential of 'the search engine and the digital archive', which, he asserts, 'do far more than merely speed things along':

> Taken together, they match the project of cultural studies to a new mode of critical reading, one which … encourages 'reading surfaces' and 'frenetic motion' as the researcher moves from hit to hit in a digital document. … [S]uch searches often have the potential to uncover previously unglimpsed constellations of terms and ideas precisely because we can deliberately search for two or more terms, mapping out sites of conjunction that might otherwise go unnoticed.[28]

The search engine enables extensive diachronic examinations of single titles, as well as synchronic explorations of 'terms and ideas' across multiple titles. The possibilities for discovery increase enormously as the text of magazines goes digital and thus searchable.

The trouble with searchability, however, is that it reinforces periodical scholarship's ongoing privileging of canonicity, associated with the values of brilliance, innovation or experimentation. Demanding the entry of a term into a box, the search engine requires a preconceived notion about what is worth searching. The keyword search tends to elide 'many of the mediating structures of the printed periodical' in favour of a content-based approach that ignores recurring features and formal patterns.[29] It also has a tendency to 'blind us to the significance of abundance' by emphasising unique hits over repetitions of the same.[30] Further, it privileges the textual at the expense of the visual and the material. The danger, then, is of a sort of disciplinary blindness, finding only what we already consider to be worth analysing and indulging in a fantasy of the magazine as media at its most immediate, or as a vessel for content in need of liberation. The study of magazines – including pulp and lowbrow publications – is justified by the presence of authors already recognised as worthy of study, and the logic of genius and uniqueness dominates as a fetish of the modern. A side-effect of this emphasis on the newness of modernity is what Ann Ardis calls the 'great divides' that have governed the study of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

> the divide between all things 'Victorian' or 'traditional' and all things 'modern' or 'modernist' (with the former often construed reductively to privilege the newness of

> twentieth-century artistic and cultural phenomena); the divides between both 'literature' and what Laurel Brake has termed the 'subjugated knowledges' of journalism and between high and low culture; and the divide between art (or modernist high seriousness, more particularly) and everyday life.[31]

Everydayness, tradition, mass culture and the subjugated knowledges of non-literary magazine writing are all features that are potentially lost when the telling example, the remarkable instance or the keyword remain at the centre of the study of magazines. The mass or middlebrow magazine, with its generically coded fiction and commercially driven repeated structures, inevitably suffers from such a bias. As David M Earle has pointed out, the archival practice of many early literary historians was driven by these biases, resulting in archives full of 'the little magazine, manuscripts, and first editions, rather than reprint magazines and literary digests, reprint and circulating library hardback editions, pulp magazines, and paperbacks'.[32] Yet again, it is the repeated, the generic, the serial that becomes structurally excluded from critical understandings of early twentieth-century print culture, an exclusion that has as much to do with methodological problems as with cultural stigma against gendered and classed forms of cultural production and consumption.

A periodical such as *The Western Home Monthly* does not yield its particular value to an analysis based in preconceived notions of canonicity or the privileging of the unique – even if it was the presence of a relatively canonical author that originally drew my attention. Perhaps its most remarkable feature is the overlapping intersections of the local and the global, and of print technology and other emergent new media such as photography and film. Technologies of representation merge into their objects of representation, so that an advertisement for a radio set simultaneously advertises the modernity of the magazine, from its ability to print colour to its participation in the transnational circulation of capital. To understand this magazine involves a shuttling back and forth between close and distant reading practices, between a historically sensitive understanding of how a feature might have signified in its moment of publication and an anachronistic, but still valuable, awareness of where that feature falls within the magazine's larger patterns of mediation. The former reading approach might involve a scholar sitting down with a single issue of a magazine and reading it, as one reads any magazine, flipping between pages and charting a unique path through its diverse content. The latter approach is made possible by the remediation of a full magazine archive into a database, through which new insights become available. Of course, there is nothing to stop a database-user from isolating a single item out of the digital archive, eliding that 'vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions' that govern the magazine's use.[33] In this final section I will explore the new modes of reading made possible by relational databases, and ask how remediation may increase the possibilities of a double-sided reading practice attentive to the past and the present.

Reading the database

Proponents of the database as a form – perhaps most famously Lev Manovich and Ed Folsom – emphasise its openness and flexibility. In Folsom's words, 'database suggests virtuality, endless ordering and reordering, and wholeness'.[34] Manovich describes databases as 'collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other', 'an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records' that remain unordered and open-ended.[35] These quotations gesture

both towards what is exciting about the database as a form, and to what is suspiciously utopian about the discourse that surrounds it. The image of a collection of individual items possessing equal significance evokes the turn in periodical studies away from reading the magazine as a context for an important literary piece. Gabriele, for example, explores how 'databases disrupt the temporal and spatial arrangements that once dominated how one read a newspaper', upsetting 'the tyranny of front pages and big-city dailies' by allowing 'different narratives' to emerge as previously marginalised content – advertisements, for example – come to stand on 'the same plane of retrievability, and relevance, as the headline story'.[36] The database potentially offers a structural resistance to the hierarchalisation of content according to form or canonicity. If attentiveness to the archive as a whole can change our understanding of middlebrow magazines for the better, databases are arguably an ideal vehicle for said attentiveness. At the same time, however, prose such as Manovich's and Folsom's belies the fact that the database still is neither unlimited nor unstructured but is rather another medium with its own materialities and, like the magazine itself, should not be collapsed into immediacy through inattentive reading.

There is an inherent danger in a remediation process blind to its own acts of mediation, a danger that Gabriele and many other scholars have warned against as a pitfall of scholarship in the digital age. Much like Seaver's description of reverse engineering, remediation into a database demands that the object of study be broken apart into the most basic possible units to maximise the possibilities of complex searches. Individual items thus become conjunctions between various tables. Take a single instalment of *Wild Geese*, for example. A researcher in the process of remediating this piece would need to document certain obvious kinds of information – issue, date, author, title and page numbers – in order to connect it to other instalments in different issues or other items appearing in the same issue. In this form, remediation into a database seems no more interpretive an activity than recording objective bibliographic details. The difference comes into play when those details are recombined in a new form that can reveal hitherto unnoticed connections. If the database can reveal those patterns of repetition and sameness that characterise the unique identity of a middlebrow magazine such as *The Western Home Monthly*, it is because of the ways in which it is *unlike* the magazine, divorcing content from the page to allow for that sometimes revelatory 'endless ordering and reordering'.

Relational databases are ideally suited to the remediation of magazines because, like magazines, they can connect large and variegated quantities of content without imposing the linear logic of a book; as Latham has pointed out, a key affordance of modern magazines is their availability to multiple and unpredictable readings, constituting a sort of pre-digital network accessed through the reader's movement across pages and types of content.[37] This productive similarity between magazines and databases as forms of new media, however, constitutes a potential methodological trap: the temptation to see these forms as isomorphous risks eliding their very real material differences, especially at the level of production and circulation. Magazines, for example, may not impose the same linear readings as books, but they do contain internal hierarchies. Issues of *The Western Home Monthly* led with prominent works of fiction that would draw in readers, interspersed with advertising content internally differentiated by size, colour and paper quality. As the serialisation of *Wild Geese* continued, it lost its pride of place; by the final instalment in January 1926 it had been bumped to third place after short stories by Leslie E Howlett and Dora O Thompson. The opening, illustrated pages of stories were designed to draw readerly attention while the scattering of later pages throughout the issue drew attention to advertisements and maximised the use of page space.

A database can neither represent nor interpret these material dimensions of an individual magazine issue, nor was it meant to. What the database can do, however, is record how frequently fiction shares a page with advertisements – and, depending on what information the researcher chooses to record, what kinds of products are advertised, the geographical location of the advertiser, the presumed audience of the advertisement and countless other details. It can highlight how often the same handful of writers and columns recurred in *The Western Home Monthly*, establishing a pattern of regular contributors and serializations across multiple issues, years or decades. And, most productively from my perspective, it can engage the periodical scholar in a mode of reading that remains attentive to the material differences between the magazine and the database, such that the process of remediation renders the media specificity of both opaque rather than transparent.

Digital remediation is not simply a means of preservation or dissemination, but a creative and critical intervention into the scholar's understanding of the archive. The fantasy of creating a transparent digitisation, of 'translat[ing] content from one medium to another'[38] without changing the meaning of that content, would allow mediation to collapse back into invisibility. By combining a processual exploration that highlights the periodical's periodicity with a materially engaged approach that undermines the illusion of immediacy often produced in the process of reading, digital remediation has the potential to be a ludic and exploratory critical practice that enhances the scholar's awareness of and immersion in the physical archive. In the process, it can cast middlebrow magazines such as *The Western Home Monthly* in a new light, encouraging scholars, including myself, not simply to mine the magazine for unique content and discard the rest, but to explore the repetitive and generic as itself valuable.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

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