Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Listserv[1]

Here's a Zoom icebreaker: Name the academic quotes that live in your head rent free. (Drop them in the chat if you want.) Still living in my head is a quote from Patrick Leary's 2005 essay "Googling the Victorians": "The time is near upon us when whatever is not online will simply cease to exist as far as anyone but specialists is concerned, a condition I have come to think of as the offline penumbra."[2] Amid the rising tide of digitization projects and enthusiasm for digital humanities, Leary cautioned us about long-term consequences. But Leary was no King Knute, demanding the digital ocean cease its rise. The "Googling" essay glows with wonder about how research materials and scholars also might become more accessible to each other online.

I was a graduate student in 2005, and Leary's concerns have largely shaped my career ever since: ponding what the penumbra of digitized Victorian studies includes, excludes, and how it got that way. Those were heady days for digitization projects and DH (a term consolidated in 2004). It made sense to talk about what was becoming digital and what remained unilluminated. But in 2021, we can see a different dimension to Leary's penumbra, as online resources *themselves* age and fall into shadow. Digital projects have shockingly shorter lifespans than their printed forebears; hardware and software just wear out so quickly in cycles of obsolescence; bits rot; the web is unstable, ephemeral, and darkening. Now, we measure the offline penumbra not only by *what* is digitized, but also by *when*, or by the fading of digital lifecycles and institutional memory.

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[1] Presented at the MVSA Lifetime Achievement Award Roundtable in Honor of Patrick Leary, Midwest Victorian Studies Association, May 22, 2021.

[2] Patrick Leary, "Googling the Victorians," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 10, no. 1 (2005): 13, https://doi.org/10.3366/jvc.2005.10.1.72.

Consider again this bit from Leary's quote: "whatever is not online will simply cease to exist as far as anyone but specialists is concerned." But what if specialists do not even know what's online either? Look at these couple of tweets from just a few months ago from Emily Bell, postdoc at Leeds, Victorianist scholar, practicing digital humanist, and editor for the Charles Dickens Letters Project. The serendipity of Twitter had just shown her a digital collection of all the serials of Dickens's novels.[3] Bell was delighted to find them, and yet stunned that she had "no idea" they existed. Why hadn't digitization brought this wonderful project into Bell's purview? "Did anyone else know," she tweeted almost incredulously?[4] Then she downloaded them from the cloud before it could blow away.

What keeps us connected to these things? Victorian periodicals scholars well know that the massive nineteenth-century proliferation of printed materials required a secondary knowledge architecture of indexes, guides, digests, handbooks, reference books, and more. But these days, media scholars are taking a different approach to this phenomenon: less in terms of reference materials, more in terms of *infrastructure*.[5] What keeps us connected to the resources and conversations that undergird our scholarship? Infrastructure. For digital resources, infrastructure is far more than a matter of digitization. In another amazing essay that lives rent free in my head, "The Enduring Ephemeral," Wendy Chun clarifies that storage does not equal memory. To digitize something does not save it. Putting things online does not put them into the minds and memories of specialists. "A memory must be held," Chun says.[6] Held by our commitments to it,

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[3] "Project Boz." Digital WPI. Gordon Library, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 2018. https://digital.wpi.edu/collections/sq87bv394
[4] Dr Emily Bell @EmilyJLB, "Thanks to …" Feb 26, 2021. Twitter. https://twitter.com/EmilyJLB/status/1365333860561653760
[5] See for instance Lisa Parks, "'Stuff You Can Kick': Toward a Theory of Media Infrastructures," in *Between Humanities and the Digital*, ed. Patrik Svensson Goldberg and David Theo (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2015), 355–73.
[6] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future Is a Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (2008): 164, https://doi.org/10.1086/595632.

migrating along our connections, attended by the technical, social, and material infrastructure that sustains what we know.

In this sense, digitization is easy. Infrastructure is hard. And lasting, sustainable infrastructure is even harder. Sometimes the most durable infrastructures are the simplest, or what some DHers call "minimal computing": plain text files, flat HTML sites, even low-fi email listservs.[7] And I want to argue—to celebrate really—that Patrick Leary has been a builder and sustainer of scholarly infrastructures during an epochal media shift in Victorian studies. His significance we see so clearly in retrospect, as lifetime achievement.

I have been a subscriber to the VICTORIA listserv since April 5, 2005. Somehow I have saved and can still access my subscription receipt and automated welcome from Patrick Leary. These subscriber emails started circulating a decade earlier: Leary sent the inaugural message on February 14, 1993, welcoming subscribers to "the first day of VICTORIA, the electric conference of Victorian Studies."[8] Let us note, friends, we gather today at an electric conference, but in a high-bandwidth, materially demanding, synchronic, and attentively strained Zoom era many of us hope we'll soon conclude. By contrast, the "electric conference" of VICTORIA has offered—and continues to offer—a low-tech, low-cost, low-bar entry to the field.[9] Every VICTORIA subscriber receives first a user guide. Not a manifesto of principles, not a masthead flexing its senior academics, very little gate keeping. For the most part, we get instructions on how to interface with a system. We tend to delete these administrative messages in favor what

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[7] Jentery Sayers, "Minimal Definitions," Minimal Computing, October 2, 2016, http://go-dh.github.io/mincomp/thoughts/2016/10/02/minimal-definitions/; Roopika Risam and Alex Gil, "Introduction: The Questions of Minimal Computing," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2022), http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/16/2/000646/000646.html.

[8] Patrick Leary, "Welcome." VICTORIA-L, February 14, 1993. https://list.indiana.edu/sympa/arc/victoria/1993-02/msg00000.html

[9] Notably, the very second message was from an undergraduate who explained he'd been up until 3:15a the night before writing a history paper. Brian Engler, "Introduction." VICTORIA-L February 15, 1993. https://list.indiana.edu/sympa/arc/victoria/1993-02/msg00001.html Could this have been the field's first "reply all"?

other subscribers send—and I would love to hear about what classic emails to VICTORIA live rent free in your heads, especially what's in Patrick's top ten. But in a way, the user guide reveals the "electric conference" not as a digitization project or a digital resource, unlike the Victorian Web which was also consolidated in 1993. Nor is VICTORIA simply a "network." Instead, in form and function, it is a system of scholarly infrastructure with its own technical, editorial, and social protocols.[10] It is also the work of sustained human labor without which it could not exist.

There are other online networks for Victorian studies, some ad hoc, and some emergent on Twitter, Mastodon, and elsewhere. But VICTORIA may be the longest-serving monarch of these electronic sovereigns. It has survived where others have failed or fallen by the wayside. Though I don't know if Patrick would see it this way, I would argue that VICTORIA-L may represent one of the most durable "digital humanities" projects in Victorian studies. Not because of what it puts online, nor for technical wizardry, but for proving what digital scholarship requires. It takes work, moderation, care, attention, migration, to hold connections, to sustain and refresh academic memory, which is only part of Patrick's lifetime achievements.

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[10] Leary's work should also be considered in the larger context of the politics and sustainability of academic networks online, i.e. "How can we create research communities online that invite everyone to participate, that are transparent about their governance and community-oriented in their values, and that remain both technologically and fiscally sustainable?" Kathleen Fitzpatrick, "Not All Networks: Toward Open, Sustainable Research Communities," in *Reassembling Scholarly Communications: Histories, Infrastructures, and Global Politics of Open Access*, ed. Martin Paul Eve and Jonathan Gray (MIT Press, 2020), 354, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11885.003.0035.