

SHAPPING THE DIGITAL DISSERTATION - BOOK REVIEW

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A photograph of a blue drop splashing on a dark background. On the top, the title is set in white serif type forming a loose composition and the generic, uninteresting cover of *Shaping the Digital Dissertation* (Open Book Publishers, 2021), edited by Virginia Kuhn, Professor of Cinema at the University of Southern California and Anke Finger, Professor of German and Media Studies and Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Connecticut. Digital dissertations are not new—they have decades of existence. But they are recent when compared to debates about the end of print of the 1980s and 1990s (*No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism*, 2003), and those unfolding when the Amazon Kindle (2007) and the Apple iPad (2010) were launched. The book as a medium has been consistently challenged for the past two decades. The unavoidable reach of the internet and the comfort of digital technology and platforms continues a friction that is unproductive—but that opens gaps for questions to be asked and strategies to be devised.

With fifteen contributions evenly divided into two sections—“Issues in Digital Scholarship and Doctoral Education” and “Shaping the Digital Dissertation in Action”—*Shaping the Digital Dissertation* implicitly focuses on three main concerns for academic research: archival, specificity and dissemination. In turn, these cover, directly or indirectly, crucial challenges for digital dissertations. First, archival is key to understanding a decades-long debate about print vs digital, and how the latter archives are far more difficult and expensive to maintain. By its definition, digital environments are ephemeral, temporary, prone to being faulty and constantly requiring maintenance and updating, which often causes difficulty in accessing information in its original form. Modes of archiving also bring to the fore the institutional complexities affecting any form of transition or implementation of new formats: free access versus academic publishing, and underlining dramatic disparities in regards to regulations between universities, even inside the same country, let alone continent.

Second, specificity further expands discussions around uniformity across academia (both in terms of presenting and archiving research), as well as publishing (replicability and business models). Theses are inherently large documents, the result of years of research and writing. While communicating them finds in a digital environment a friendly haven, it can become counter-productive as a space for (long, immersive) reading and experiencing them in their entirety. Anthony Masure’s chapter “The Digital Thesis as a Website” is a case-in-point: his web-based thesis is still an exercise in editorial design, and inevitably tied to the book form and its centuries-old legacy of modes of reading and composing information and thinking about knowledge transmission. Specificity puts responsibility in institutions, namely in demanding flexibility for exceptions, to being content-sensitive despite the seduction and optimisation of universality—after all, a dissertation from the humanities will likely be fundamentally different from those coming from art and design, which will also vary depending on the object and positioning of the research. While text is still the fundamental tool for knowledge-sharing in academia, pilot projects such as the [Creator Doctus](#) (2017) can substantially contribute to rethinking doctoral programmes, and with those, the digital dissertation. Finally, dissemination is a crucial element that is interlinked with the previous two: it involves issues of exposure, reach, categorisation and indexing, copyright and image clearance, as well as design. The reliance on designers manifests itself clearly under this banner, revealing the need to address doctoral training in this domain, with collaboration, automation and DIY in close competition for attention, by necessity, imposition or profit.

This book makes a relevant contribution to a complex and nuanced debate, finding important precedents in publications such as *The Sage Handbook of Digital Dissertations and Theses* (2012), and expanding an ongoing international discourse. *Shaping the Digital Dissertation* crucially reveals once again that to alter dissertation formats and the many

dimensions affecting its form, the format of the doctoral degree itself must be challenged. It largely lacks carefully articulated strategies to implement fundamental change and affect the politics at work in a specific country or university, leveraging much-needed systemic efforts. There is little doubt that digital dissertations are fundamental in sharing new knowledge, despite the tiredness that extensive reading on a screen creates. But issues such as open-source code, free versus paid access, maintenance and accessibility, as well as institutional investment, will keep providing fertile ground for disputed political and technological monopolies. While this inevitably long transition unfolds, digital environments and formats will continue to be a complement, not a replacement, to printed matter.