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MEDIEVAL MEDIA REVOLUTIONS: EDITOR'S PREFACE

CAROL SYMES

IN APRIL OF 2015, I had the opportunity to convene a symposium on this topic at the University of Illinois, to which I welcomed three historians whose work I admire: Warren Brown (California Institute of Technology), Christian de Pee (University of Michigan), and Jessica Goldberg (University of California, Los Angeles).¹ My own research had led me to the premise that the “documentary revolution” of northwestern Europe, which appears to begin in the eleventh century, was really more of a *media* revolution: a time when extant practices of documentation became more widely accessible to a larger number of people, who thus had a greater stake in the making, interpretation, transmission, and archiving of texts.² I was eager to hear from these scholars, and I asked them to think about whether they saw media revolutions taking place in their own regions of the medieval globe—in western Europe under the Carolingian Empire, in Song dynasty China, and among the merchant communities of the Mediterranean, respectively.

The development of written modes of communication within a particular culture is usually intended, at least initially, to facilitate certain kinds of transactions among certain specific users. But media revolutions occur when new technologies of reproduction or unforeseen, innovative uses of writing lead to the widening of participatory forms of documentation, expanded communication networks, and the recording of many different kinds of information. The obvious contemporary analogy is the internet and especially the productive/disruptive uses of social

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2 Symes, “Out in the Open” and “Popular Literacies.” The drivers and implications of this “documentary revolution” or “mutation documentaire” (the phrase is that of Barthélemy, *La Société*, 19–128) have been most famously explored by Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*. However, scholars have more recently established that lay people in western Europe were actively engaged in documentary processes for centuries before this, notably Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*; Franklin, *Writing and Society and Culture in Early Rus*; Brown et al., *Documentary Culture and the Laity*. I will develop this argument in a forthcoming book.

media. Another analogy could be drawn between medieval texts and the graphical user interface (GUI), which enables visual, sonic, and tactile hypertextual interactions: interactions that complicate, undermine, or enhance other forms of literacy. Our symposium accordingly focused on moments or movements that might be regarded as “medieval media revolutions.” In addition to the presentations of our invited guests, we had the benefit of insightful comments by three of my colleagues at Illinois: Renée Trilling (Department of English), Elizabeth Oyler (Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, now at the University of Pittsburgh), and Mauro Nobili (Department of History and Center for African Studies).

The two articles published in this issue are outgrowths of that productive day and I am very grateful to their authors—not only for their willingness to expand on their own papers, but for their generous, thoughtful perspectives on one another’s work, as captured in the concluding exchange. I am also grateful to Jessica Goldberg, who was unable to contribute to this issue but whose participation and paper, “Of Ships and (No) Sealing Wax: Considering the Many Parts of an Islamicate Media Revolution,” inspired all of us.

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Carol Symes (symes@illinois.edu) is the founding executive editor of *The Medieval Globe*. She is an associate professor of history at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, with joint appointments in medieval studies, global studies, and theatre. Her own research focuses on the history of communication technologies, the social and cultural history of western Europe from ca. 1000 to 1300, and the abiding influence of medievalism in the modern world. Her current book project, "Mediated Texts and Their Makers in Medieval Europe," is being completed with the support of a fellowship from the National Foundation for the Humanities. She is also engaged in editing the medieval volume of Bloomsbury's *A Cultural History of Media*.