Medieval Media Revolutions: Editor's Preface

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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).\footnote{This event was sponsored by the Program in Medieval Studies at Illinois, with support from the Centers for Advanced Study and East Asian and Pacific Studies, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; the Departments of the Classics, Communication, English, History, and Philosophy; the European Union Center; the Graduate School of Library & Information Science; the Institute for Computing in the Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences; and the Unit for Criticism & Interpretive Theory. I owe special thanks to Professor Charles D. Wright, then Director of the Program, for making it possible.}

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.\footnote{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.}

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 media.
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.

**Works Cited**


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