CHAPTER 5

Old Texts and New Media: Jewish Books on the Move and a Case for Collaboration

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Scholarship is often a collaborative practice masquerading as solitary achievement. The worlds of making knowledge always rely, both formally and informally, on webs of collaboration. This was as true in the past as it is today. Before a printed book could emerge from the press, it required the labor of writers and editors, typesetters and correctors, patrons and financiers, censors and privilege-bearers—often people who were divided across boundaries of religion, gender, space, and class. The transit of books after their production was similarly complicated: printed leaves traveled from printer's shop to bindery, onward to markets, fairs, and peddler's carts, where they were purchased by scholars and lay-readers, returned to circulation as gifts and bequests, and eventually incorporated into new libraries and private collections.[1] The story of even a single individual book copy often makes manifest an extensive network of relationships that facilitated its production, dissemination, reception, and preservation.

In the last few decades, the history of the book has emerged as a form of analysis for the study of cultural, political, and social change. Historians recognize that the technology of printing was never solely determinative of the spread of culture or habits of reading, and that users encounter books and their content in different ways—realizations that call for careful

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[1] For a limited selection of works on the transit of books as indices of social and cultural relations, see: [1—4].

and nuanced tools to assess the impact of printing and dissemination.[2] This principle animates *Footprints: Jewish Books through Time and Place*, a web platform and database that tracks the movement of books across location and historical time and, in so doing, offers a tool for reconstructing relationships of various types. Its digital platform is designed to aggregate scattered information about books using trusted crowdsourcing, institutional partnerships, and linked open data to collect and expose evidence. Drawing from title pages, inscriptions, owners' signatures, censors' marks, estate inventories, auction catalogs, and correspondence, this digital humanities (DH) project highlights and makes use of previously unknown resources in a way that reimagines the practice of (Jewish) book history.[3]

Much as *Footprints* reveals social ties in history, it is itself a product of social connections and collaborative energies. Like other DH projects, *Footprints* is not simply enhanced by collaborative activity; it is premised upon principled flexibility and cooperation with a network of contributors and users. Beginning with four co-directors, each in different roles operating out of different institutions, the project's reach expands and relies upon contributors from all quarters of the academic and scholarly world: librarians, students, collectors, independent scholars, and professors, who mine sources for data in institutions and private collections in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. *Footprints* invites scholars to transcend their individual research projects even as they contribute "micropublications" to the database, and, in return, the project eschews a singular research agenda in favor of a malleable and adaptable data set that can be recruited by individual scholars to suit their own scholarly interests. Most importantly, unlike traditional printed modes of scholarship, the digital and iterative nature of this project permits (even demands) that we, as its directors, continue to rethink, revise, and revamp the project as we progress. *Footprints* is always growing and changing, and obliges careful reflection on an ongoing basis.

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[2] For a case study dealing with the reception of one literary work in both manuscript and print, see [5].

[3] Jewish book history has only recently moved from intellectual dimensions of literary reception towards the material conditions of literary exchange and to an explicit focus on dissemination and movement of books. For a sampling of recent works on the history of the early modern Hebrew printed books (see [6–9]).

5.1 COLLABORATION AMONG THE PROJECT DIRECTORS

Research in the field of cooperative learning has revealed that the acquisition of knowledge depends not only on the content one wishes to acquire and disseminate, but also on the nature of the encounter with others with whom one learns [10−12]. Success in the DH requires a self-conscious understanding of scholarship as a social undertaking [13]. *Footprints'* achievements are rooted in the cooperative work of four project directors, both faculty and librarian, from different institutions, each representing different fields of Jewish Studies. Confronted with a new mode of collecting, processing, and analyzing evidence necessary for advancing our research into the history of the Jewish book, the need to work cooperatively became clear early on.

The idea for a database that aggregates evidence for the movement of Jewish books emerged from discussions among members of a working group on the Jewish Book at the Center for Jewish History (initiated by Adam Shear and co-led by Marjorie Lehman and later Joshua Teplitsky), which met from 2009 to 2013. This group of historians, scholars of Hebrew literature, anthropologists, art historians, and librarians shared research with each other in the interest of defining the state of the field and its future. Encouraged by the Center for Jewish History to identify tangible results of the seminar, the directors seized upon a need in the field to analyze evidence found in individual book copies about the Jewish book trade, its readership, cross-cultural exchanges, the creation of private collections, and censorship. It became apparent that a database recording information about book copies would fill a lacuna in studies of the book trade and dissemination of texts already identified. Michelle Chesner joined the project at this time, first as a librarian consultant, and then as a full co-director, offering a new set of perspectives on the challenges and prospects of the project. The project existed in theory more than in practice until Lehman's course on the history of the book at the Jewish Theological Seminary led to a partnership with the Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning to create the website.

Each co-director brings different ideas and methodological orientations to the project, which allows for varied perspectives on critical developments, use cases, and additional collaborations. We hold affiliations across the gamut of American higher education, from large public universities, to an elite private university, to a religious seminary, representing diverse institutional cultures, goals, and, importantly, resources. These

differences are bridged by mutual respect between the four co-directors. With a librarian, an early career historian, a tenured historian, and a professor of religion, we recognize each other's needs (for publication, or inability to attend a 3-week workshop due to a 9–5 job commitment, or even the need to balance carpools and camp drop-offs), and each of us has stepped up for another at different times. The co-directors meet weekly (virtually) to work on the project, carving out time from the faculty and institutional responsibilities of their full-time positions. Time is spent discussing development, writing grants, conference planning, and writing articles. We coordinate our schedules around changing time zones due to conferences, fellowship locations, and sabbaticals to ensure that these weekly meetings are inviolate. Each meeting covers a set list of items in an agenda that we create during the days between meetings, itself a collaboratively-generated, evolving text. We add notes during our meeting to these agendas and store them in a folder on Google Drive so that we have a record of our progress to date. Indeed, all of our documentation is cloud-based (on Google Drive and Dropbox), and we write grant proposals, project plans and updates, and even book chapters collaboratively. Part of our success has been an openness to technological experimentation with different platforms (Google Drive vs Dropbox; Zoom vs Google Hangouts; Google Docs vs Word), supplanting "comfort" applications with more optimal tools. We credit our iron-clad commitments to weekly meetings, collaborative agenda setting, and, paradoxically, to flexibility itself, as the ingredients for success. Indeed, we have developed a project model that would be useful in each of our institutions for committee work in other areas.[4]

Most gratifying is the way each of us brings ourselves to the project and contributes—from our professional needs to our scholarly interests and expertises. Teplitsky's research focuses on the movement of books and the constitution of libraries as windows into social and political life in early modern Europe. But he also keeps us thinking about scholarly credit and credibility, recognizing the benefits of collaboration while acknowledging the yardsticks of academic review. This led to our commitment to treating data entries as research micropublications.[5] As a librarian,

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[4] On the other hand, this has actually been a source of frustration for the individual partners in their other institutional committee work, by elevating our expectations for successful collaboration.

[5] While we remain committed to crediting each and every contribution, we are also fully committed to open access and open source models, while ensuring that all contributions are appropriately acknowledged for their work. We use a CC BY-SA 4.0 license for the site, which allows openness of access while requiring citations.

Chesner emphasized the need for standards, such as a link to the *Bibliography of the Hebrew Book* to identify imprints, and the *Virtual International Authority File* to identify people.[6] She trained us in the value of sticking to a rotation for weekly data integrity checks because of the challenges posed by the crowdsourcing aspect of our site. We now have a weekly schedule for quality control of data, and note problems and questions on a shared spreadsheet that can be tackled collaboratively at our weekly meetings. Drawing from her research on a 16th century book published under multiple names [15], Lehman reminded us to have a "literary work" title for a book as well as an "imprint" title. Her pedagogical interests yielded a course taught on the history of the Jewish book and a partnership with Columbia's Center for Teaching and Learning to develop the site in conjunction with the needs of the course. Some of us forged connections at DH workshops, reminding us of the learning curve that could be surmounted by familiarizing ourselves with other networking projects. Shear's research explores questions of literary reception,[7] and he also suggested that undergraduates at varying levels of training could enhance the site, to great success.

The technological developments of our era sometimes produce a sense of concern over digital methods among those actively engaged in the humanities. Some see the increasing dependence on technology as a threat to the development of rational and critical human beings who think for themselves, and who are capable of relationships with others [16]. This has not been our experience, however. We have found that today's technology offers us a platform to share and exchange skillsets, and to adopt the Internet's open–platform principles of nonegoism, constructive criticism, and continuous change [17]. Collective decision-making is a skill we have learned through our work together, better trained as we now are in managing our heated debates and resolving the challenges that continue to arise. We strive to respect the individual disciplinary backgrounds of each director, and the tempos at which they undertake decisions. Of necessity, this means we foster an enduring spirit of compromise and openness that does not efface individuality, but rather aims to incorporate divergent strengths. Different training, knowledge, and backgrounds between the co-directors mean that a decision about

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[6] The *Bibliography of the Hebrew Book is* hosted by the National Library of Israel [14]. The *Virtual International Authority File* is available at http://www.viaf.org.
[7] See footnote 2.

various issues (e.g., allowing the public full access to all of our data, or suppressing rather than deleting out-of-scope data) is discussed fully, until we come to a compromise between the more conservative and more impulsive among us.

5.2 COLLABORATING WITH THE GLOBAL SCHOLARLY NETWORK

While the project's direction emerges from the concerted action of its directors, *Footprints* depends upon a wide network of contributors. In our travels to conferences across the United States, Europe, and Israel, each of us has spent much time discussing our database with colleagues. It is these discussions that have fueled deep interest in *Footprints* and our colleagues' desire to join us in building this resource, which have honed the design of the site. A wide audience of librarians and researchers has recognized the potential of *Footprints*, not only for individual copy-specific cataloging projects, but also as a way to make formerly hidden collections known and usable to the scholarly world.

Making collections visible can be taken quite literally, through digitization that makes texts accessible by uploading images of them to the Internet, with varying quality of metadata. In contrast, *Footprints* goes a step further by harnessing digital methods not only to publicize data, but also to produce a corpus of new data and to generate interpretations which further research in the history of the Jewish book. Each "footprint" is based on both discrete evidence (e.g., an owner's signature in a book) and research (e.g., scholarly biographical research which identifies the owner and locates him or her in place and time).[8] In this way, each footprint—along with the ways that the footprint is conceptualized and connected in the database—forms both evidence about the past and a narrative about the past. *Footprints* involves organizing and representing data across three dimensions—linking multiple actors and texts to each other—and is itself a critical act of scholarly analysis. *Footprints* is thus both a toolkit and an argument.

The amassing of data, and the ways they are linked in a relational database, make possible quantification, comparison, and different kinds of statistical analysis. Quantification can result in new insights into the

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[8] In our view, copy-specific cataloging is an act of research and should be recognized as such.

economic value of books, changing modes of study, and patterns of thought (such as Jewish mysticism, rationalism and skepticism, legal patterns, women's literature, and folk culture), subtle forms of exchange between regions and Jewish subethnicities (such as Ashkenaz and Sepharad), and transitions to modernity. We can associate phenomena we may otherwise have overlooked, sharpening distinctions about owners, donors, sellers, censors, scholars, and librarians that usually escape our grasp, bringing places such as Amsterdam, Venice, Constantinople, Krakow, Prague—and Buenos Aires, Tel Aviv, and New York—into a single view.

Moreover, this project invites questions that we have not yet considered, fundamentally shifting the nature of the information we can process and the questions we can ask and answer. Masses of data and statistics are no substitute for close reading, but they create an opportunity for individual scholars to pose new questions to sets of data never before assembled. The amount of information necessary to constitute a critical mass in order to pose questions that make a new literary history possible, exceeds the capacity of one, four, or even twenty researchers.[9] The project therefore relies upon a vast network of invested contributors to lend their efforts to a project that may not relate specifically to their precise objects of inquiry. The database, forged by collaboration, is available for individual scholars to search, collate, and recombine according to his or her own research agenda.

All scholarly work depends on relationships—with other researchers, librarians, and experts across different subfields. *Footprints* relies on these relationships not only for feedback and advice, but also to populate the project with data from the widest possible range of sources. Indeed, attendance at different conferences, such as the American Historical Association, the Society of Biblical Literature, the Association of Jewish Libraries, the Renaissance Society of America, and the Association for Jewish Studies provide additional opportunities to recruit contributors and users. A fortuitous meeting at a conference led to a grant-funded collaboration to embed a researcher at Marsh's Library, Dublin, to work with their small but significant collection of Hebraica and Judaica in the fall of 2017, and to perform copy-specific cataloging as well as provenance

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[9] See the observations on the necessity of collaboration and the transcendence of individual research agenda in [18]. See also [19,20].

research. Additional interactions have led to collaborations with libraries in Moscow, Seattle, St. Louis, Vienna, and others.[10]

   As an ongoing project, each step forward requires extensive consultation and collaboration. Users throughout the world have given us important feedback that we have used to advise our technical team on improvements to the site. No doubt, through our work with *Footprints*, our contribution to the globalization of the academy is sustained by the interdependence of individuals, each of whom understands the benefit of sharing ideas. These are people who recognize the importance of relying on one another to expand what we know about Jewish books, specifically the pathways of individual copies that have their own history of relationships to the people who read, owned, censored, collected, bought, and sold them. Working on *Footprints* has provoked us to think differently. As such, the site has become dynamic, changing week-to-week, as we think and rethink how we might improve it so that we are continuously moving forward.

5.3 COLLABORATION WITHOUT COLLABORATION?

How does the cultivation of relationships with scholars from around the world differ from the "normal" synergies and serendipitous discoveries inherent in the way travel, conferences, and correspondences have generated new knowledge in the academic world for centuries? How is a DH project like *Footprints* different from a traditional scholarly project enhanced by conversation? The *Footprints* database not only offers a new technology platform, but it also offers a hub for connection. This kind of platform creates a new kind of community, and a new network.

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[10] Our relationships with scholars across multiple fields also brought *Footprints* to the attention of scholars interested in locating Jewish books looted by the Nazis. The Allies discovered millions of these books after World War II and, without the ability to catalog them in any way, loaded them onto pallets and shipped them in huge loads to various libraries in Eastern and Western Europe, America, and Palestine. *Footprints* offers a platform for scholars interested in systematically researching locations, shelf marks, stamps, owners, content, authors, bindings, marginal notes, and other information carried within these books. See [21, 22], on the broader issues regarding Nazi looting [23].

Footprints relies on a growing community of individual scholars enlisted into a trusted crowdsourcing model.[11] This model involves more than simply a collaboration between a lot of people. Rather, it draws upon the important premises of network theory that have become so robust in the age of the Internet. A traditional collaborative project entails operations in concert by multiple partners as a group. (Indeed, the management work by the four directors described above works this way.) However, the crowdsourcing undertaken by *Footprints* represents a scattered collaboration of people (beyond the directors) who do not move as one, but rather are connected across a shifting series of webs and nodes. Their research projects may vary widely, but *Footprints* generates a platform for the material of one scholar to be used by another, to whom the first scholar has no connection at all. Networks operate almost in opposition to multilateralism: they rely not on strong ties between familiars at the same "table" (virtual or real), but upon weak ties mediated by the research project itself.[12] The connection of A to C is tenuous, but since both A and C are linked to B, they are able to marshal the resources and information unique to each. This means, in essence, a shared enterprise that does not depend on working directly (or even indirectly) with fellow contributors.

By allowing any individual scholar sitting in a rare book room to become a node in the network, *Footprints* gives life to data that is often otherwise ignored or discarded when it does not serve the research agenda of a single individual scholar. It offers a venue other than the specialized monograph or article for these triumphs of archival discovery to stay alive, and in the process become useful to others. Rather than pruning away material that will then never see the light of day, *Footprints* allows a scholar to publish that data by different means, and to receive credit for the act of scholarly research even when it does not eventuate in the footnotes of a monograph. The beneficiaries of these

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[11] Publications with a hundred or more authors are more common in the sciences (particularly in some fields of physics and biomedical sciences) than in the humanities. Given the possibilities of crowdsourcing and large-scale collaboration presented by digital platforms, perhaps it is time for consideration of the implication of this practice among humanists and social scientists. For thoughtful reflection on the issue (as well as the coining of the useful term "hyperauthorship"), see [24].

[12] See, e.g., [25].

micropublications are manifold, especially in generating better inventories for the next user.[13]

5.4 ADDRESSING CONCERNS

Our project and some of the key concepts that underpin it are not necessarily self-evident. We first presented the project in a series of informal round table discussions with a variety of stakeholders among Judaica librarians, historians of the book, art historians, cultural historians, and literary scholars. Some researchers expressed interest in formalizing or more easily facilitating the informal ways that they have long shared knowledge of incidental findings in a rare book room or an archive. This group welcomed an opportunity to link such findings in a way that would make them useful to other scholars. But we also encountered resistance from a few library professionals who raised skepticism about the idea of crowdsourcing. They asked us about training protocols, supervision, moderation, and quality control. In order to respond to these legitimate concerns, we have created instructions and documentation for users, and new users are given in-person (or Skype) training before they can begin work on the site. A formal moderation structure has been incorporated into the site, and records that do not conform to our standards are flagged for review (there is also planned development to further enhance moderation of the records). As mentioned earlier, we also have a weekly rotation for data integrity, which allows us to ensure that our data is "clean." All of this work is not only aimed at allaying the concerns of some in the library world, but also fuels a cultural shift that would break down artificial distinctions between "cataloging" and "research," extending beyond DH.

Others who were skeptical pointed to crowdsourcing models that had generated great hopes, only to later flounder.[14] If projects that could draw on many more potential participants failed, how then would we succeed? Obviously we could not fully answer such a question in advance of trying to engage a broad community. But what has become clear is that one does not build the community in advance of starting such a project. New

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[13] Some of this material is drawn from a recent blog post by Teplitsky [26].

[14] See, e.g., the fortunes of Early English Books Online's EEBO Interactions: https://early-modernonlinebib.wordpress.com/2011/07/05/eebo-interactions-as-an-interactive-guide/; https://earlymodernonlinebib.wordpress.com/2013/03/11/eebo-interactions-ends/ (accessed February 27, 2017).

collaborators, both institutional and individual, can be added to the net-work over time, as a result of both concerted effort and serendipitous encounters as described earlier. And as the network grows, more nodes make such encounters occur more frequently. Historians of science, the book, and related fields of knowledge-making have presented us with a nuanced view of the intimate relations between academic practice, per-sonal familiarity, and the relationships between financing research and conducting research.[15] But what those historians have also showed us is the contingent nature of such communities of knowledge. Just because a trusted crowdsourcing model was a rare form of scholarly practice in the late 20th century or early 21st century, does not mean it will forever be marginal.[16]

5.5   COLLABORATION WITH MULTIPLE AGENDAS

Much as *Footprints* relies upon contributors to submit data that is inde-pendent of any single research pursuit, the project also resists posing a sin-gle driving question: it aims instead to produce an instrument for research that can be used by different scholars to different ends. In this regard, too, it differs from traditional modes of scholarship that are structured accord-ing to an argument and evidence carefully marshaled and interpreted in service to that argument. As a DH project, *Footprints* provides a vehicle for posing new questions and framing new outlooks on matters related to the history of the Jewish book. Moreover, *Footprints* offers a medium for data to be analyzed by users in ways that may diverge from the intentions and research agendas of its contributors.

   "Using" the *Footprints* database can mean both contributing and extracting data. In this sense, *Footprints* differs from some databases or repositories of digitized material where the focus is presenting the fin-ished products of closed-circuit research with a finite endpoint [31]. With a strong commitment to maintenance, and to continuously recharging our community of those interested in *Footprints*, it has become far easier to project and sustain long-term goals.

   A century ago, the philosopher of education John Dewey wrote about the importance of a "continuous spiral of knowledge." Knowledge-

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[15] See, e.g., [27, 28]. On the professionalization of the historical discipline and its histori-cally circumscribed pursuits, see [29].

[16] For a recent experiment in crowdsourcing, see [30].

making, he argued, is rooted in the process of reaching back, using prior knowledge to construct something new by reflecting on it in a learning process with others [11,32]. Using a collaborative project model generates space for the type of fertile discussion needed to transform our dispositions, our understanding of the way scholarship is done, and in turn, what we can contribute to the history of the Jewish book. We attribute the success of *Footprints* to the model we continue to sustain in all of the work we do on this project.

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