

## “Profiles in Digital Scholarship & Publishing: Justin Hodgson”

Elizabeth Barnett

---

*Xchanges, as an exclusively digital publisher, is naturally subject to and keenly interested in the practical issues surrounding the future and preservation of digital scholarly work. In the exploration of issues surrounding digital scholarship, we've produced a series of three interviews with prominent academic scholars and editors whose work spans the intersections of rhetoric, pedagogy, publishing, and technology. We hope that Xchanges readers enjoy the viewpoints looking both back at what's happened in the field of digital publishing and pedagogy in the last decade or two and forward to what lies ahead.*

*In the first of this series, University of New Mexico English MA student, Elizabeth Barnett, conducted a video interview with Professor Justin Hodgson of Indiana University, who heads up the editorial board of The Journal of Undergraduate Multimedia Projects, or, TheJump+. This issue of Xchanges focuses on undergraduate research, and the two began their discussion of issues with digital scholarship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly as it involves undergraduates in the academy.*

---

### About Justin Hodgson

Dr. Hodgson is an assistant professor of rhetoric, writing, and digital media studies in the Department of English at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. His book, [Post-Digital Rhetoric and The New Aesthetic](#), is available as of March 2019. Justin is the founder and general editor of [TheJUMP+](#), *The Journal of Undergraduate Multimedia Projects*. This juried, electronic journal publishes exceptional undergraduate multimedia projects from students around the world. It also serves as a pedagogical resource for teachers interested in and working in multimedia and digital composition and scholarship.

---

### Showcasing Undergraduate Work

*Xchanges: TheJUMP+ showcases some astounding undergraduate multimodal composition work, highly creative and technically advanced. You have a submission formula that includes the student's and instructor's reflections, peer responses, and assignment prompts.*

*Why focus on undergraduate composition? Was the decision to include the supplemental materials solely based on THEJUMP+ goal to also be an instructor resource? Or is there more to including these in a critical sense? Or to more fully situate the compositions regarding authors' rhetorical choices?*

JH: I graduated from Clemson in May of 2009, and I started at Texas that fall. One of the first classes I was teaching was a "Writing for Digital Environments" class, which is something they had on the books. I was only teaching one class, and it was like, "Okay, just getting used to life as faculty at a major school." I had this assignment, a weird little video remix assignment. A student made this project called "Communism" (<https://jumpplus.net/about/a-jump-history/>). Much like you, I was amazed and thought, "My goodness. What? Who? I didn't teach you any of these things and this is genuinely amazing."

View video clip 1 here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jY7bCGmycY>

I shared it with my graduate cohort from Clemson and some folks I've known outside of there, and I asked, "Well, where would these projects go?" If a student writes a really brilliant paper or poem or argument or some kind, we have journals for that. But not for these kinds of projects. I said, "You know what? We should just start a journal," and they said, "Yes, sounds great." That was Friday, and so by Monday, I had mocked up a prototype of what it's supposed to look like. That's how we started. We always talked about needing the repository for the stuff our students did because as a teacher I can only show my own projects, and I had to get permission, and there was no unified space for that. This inherently filled two roles, and because of that, I knew early on that I wanted to do a couple of things with student work as I was mocking up this project.

1. One was that it had to facilitate a pedagogical value because, let's be honest, there's not a widespread interest in undergraduate journals. I think they do amazing work, and I think people in our field read them. But for young Writing Studies scholars, it's hard to get a really notable readership for their undergraduate scholarship as they're exploring topics. I know young scholars *are* writing, and a number of their articles have been cited by scholars in the field as well, but it's not the same dynamic as College Composition and Communication (<http://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/ccc>) or Rhetoric Society Quarterly (<https://www.jstor.org/journal/rhetsociquar>). I knew it had to have a pedagogical value, and they need to be built partly around that because that's who the audience is going to be. So it wasn't for undergraduates as much as it was for undergraduates in classes working with faculty.
2. The second part was, and this is the rhetorical part, that they affected me forever, that these projects that are amazing or engaging or dynamic or whatever we want to call them, by design, and make *me* want to make things. I'm trained to offer a critical response, to start poking holes at it and saying what it stands for or what it does or why it doesn't look as well, but when it comes to the digital, my gut reaction is, "I should do that with this video," or "What would I make?" or "How can I do this with something

else?" I knew that in going in, we wanted to create responses from our editorial board to each piece such that each part of the project would form its own medial ecology. The result was that for each project there's like 10 or 8 little nuggets of things that go with it, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on what the students give to us.

The reason for undergraduate work is very simple. One, they do amazing things, and there's no place for that to go, and two, while I do teach graduate classes, I have far more experience and exposure to undergraduates doing weird, wonderful media stuff, so that's why the undergraduate focus

### **Electracy and Thinking Digitally**

*Xchanges: Back around 2015 in a blog post titled "[Introducing Digital Rhetoric at IU's CMCL Colloquium Seriesm](https://iuenglish.wordpress.com/2015/03/11/introducing-digital-rhetoric-at-ius-cmcl-colloquium-series/)," <https://iuenglish.wordpress.com/2015/03/11/introducing-digital-rhetoric-at-ius-cmcl-colloquium-series/> you outlined the emergence of digital rhetoric, beginning with Cynthia Selfe and ending with Greg Ulmer and how his concept of "electracy" informs your own research.*

*Do you still use this term "[electracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electracy)" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electracy> and is it still a central part of your research focus today? Has your definition changed in the last few years? If so, how? Is there a difference between "electracy" and "digital literacy"? If so, what is that difference as you see it?*

JH: "Do I still use it in my work?" The answer is a mixed bag of yes and no. To understand that, I think it helps to know the difference between the two. Electracy and digital literacy have a lot of overlap. They are playing in the same space, which is trying to account for what happens with digital technologies and how it's impacting us. The real difference is they kind of operate from completely different epistemological orientations. Digital literacy by design is often tied to functional capacity with the technology and or developing critical skills with the technology: knowing how to use it and how to interpret what's going on, but then maybe at some point, how to use it for other ends or to intervene into it. It's very much tied to a kind of technological based form of understanding and then the application. Whereas, electracy is more of what happens when these tools set upon us. They fundamentally change how we see, interact, and engage the world. They change the spaces where, for Ulmer, digital citizenship can take place. His focus is more a matter of how are these media setting upon me and how do they change me? The core of his work is conductive logic and showing how digital media and digital technologies work on a principle of the relay. When you participate in digital spaces, it's a matter of relay and using the individual to discover and invent.

Then the question is, "Does it still manifest in my work?" It does and it doesn't. In the kind of conversations that I have across my campus and with other folks, the term digital literacy has gotten more stock. It's easier to frame a lot of things in terms of digital literacy than to teach them about this electracy paradigm. But I think the principles that Ulmer's after, the ways in which we start from the individual, we invent from the self, and that electronic technologies allow us to discover new things in new ways, and focus on matters of affect, engagement, atmosphere, and attunement, remain at the core of the inquiry that I do.

View video clip 2 here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiUM3Kj0zos>

In my book *Post-Digital Rhetoric and The New Aesthetic* ([https://www.amazon.com/Post-Digital-Rhetoric-New-Aesthetic-Materiality/dp/0814213944/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1542691591&sr=1-1&keywords=9780814213940](https://www.amazon.com/Post-Digital-Rhetoric-New-Aesthetic-Materiality/dp/0814213944/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1542691591&sr=1-1&keywords=9780814213940)), essentially what happens is I'm performing a lot of Ulmer's ideas, but just performing them in a scholarly mode, rather than talking about it as electracy. It's an odd thing to explain if you haven't read one, two, or 20 of the works by Ulmer. His life's work is the series of books that are all leading to building an entirely new paradigm. Victor Vitanza once referred to him as the Aristotle of the 21st century. He's inventing a new metaphysics if you will.

My term, post-digital rhetoric, that's not a common frame. I'm trying to build my own platform to say, "No, here's how I want to think about it. Here's how I think we should be approaching this stuff." I'm just trying to bridge conversations because I'm between art, aesthetics, rhetoric, and media studies.

## Post Digital Rhetoric

*Xchanges: Your book comes out in March 2019. Who is your audience for this work? How you see James Bridle's New Aesthetic operating in a post-digital world? Are we post-digital?*

JH: My argument is that we're so saturated by digital technologies now that we have as many, if not more, mediated experiences than we do non-mediated experiences in a very meaningful capacity. With that kind of condition and the kind of ubiquity of technologies with smart sensors everywhere that respond to us, we've just fully been enveloped by the digital. Digital is now just fundamental to the human condition in developed countries, and even in many non-developed countries. In the same way that writing dramatically impacted culture even in cultures that didn't write, the digital has done the same thing. To talk about the digital as something distinct or different or out there or unique is problematic today.

The metaphor that we used to use was cyberspace. Cyberspace from William Gibson was this world that exists outside, and it's like, "It's floating out there, this

digital space." Cyberspace, even if you think about it like that, is still very much materials built in plastic and circuits and energy and all kinds of weird materialities, but it's not out there anymore, it's actually down around us. We're not in cyberspace; it literally has "everted" into the world. Once that happens, then the distinctions we used to make and the way in which we think about our relationships to technology have to accommodate the fact that it's no longer a separate, digital/real dynamic. The digital and the real are just one and the same. To answer your question, I do think we're post-digital in this regard, that we are so saturated by technologies, particularly in developed countries, that it is very difficult to imagine doing things in ways that aren't already tied to a digital process.

More importantly, when we see a really complex thing occurring, we start to think about the computability behind it. The digital is a fundamental part of the way in which we filter and experience and make sense of the world. Rhetoric then has to account for what that does to us, and that's what the book is attempting to do.

James Bridle is a digital futurist and around 2011, he makes a blog post on this site called [Really Interesting Group](http://www.reallyinterestinggroup.com) (<http://www.riglondon.com/blog/>), which is a bunch of artists, engineers, designers, and technologists in London who are just doing creative things. He basically writes that, "You know, I've been noticing there's this new aesthetic that's happening." He's not trying to invent a new aesthetic, he just says he sees this thing happening in the commerce and creative practices and culture and all kinds of weird ways. Bridle's point was what's happening is all these aesthetic things from this computational world, intentional or otherwise, are manifesting as aesthetics in a digital yet material world. It's like computability has turned itself inside out to reveal its aesthetic values, and so, that gets labeled as this generic thing called "the new aesthetic" and the people then, of course, take issue with it and do all kinds of fun stuff.

For example, we are surrounded by Wi-Fi. I'm on Wi-Fi right now, but we don't see it. It's not visible to the human eye except in this little icon that tells me it's on or off. There is this artist and design theorist by the name of Luis Hernan who figured out a way to take photographs of Wi-Fi, and he maps the different Wi-Fi intensities to a color spectrum and uses a long exposure lens to capture those signals. It's really funny and fascinating because we all have these tiny little swirling eggs of Wi-Fi around us from our phones. What Luis has done is he's reoriented the world to Hertzian space. The world is now a series of electronic waves and not just like physical material space.

The question with all this stuff is how do we become aware of that? How do we re-attune our sensibilities to take stock of the things that we can see or can't? What practices can we then use to draw attention to these kinds of cultural conditions or help others become aware of them and use that awareness in rhetorical ways. I study it as an ecology, with its practices, to try and discern a set of guides for doing rhetoric in a post-digital culture. I'm trying to not systematize it

but let it coalesce enough to hand off to other people and say, "Look, here's a set of ways you could think about human technology relationships today and how you can use them as a guide for making things."

## Technology and Rhetorical Consciousness

*Xchanges: In the past, you've talked about social media and online/digital culture studies and the dawning recognition that even hard technical activities like coding, programming, and algorithm creation are rhetorical.*

*Do you think we as multimodal and digital composition instructors should be calling students' attention to the rhetorical nature of hard technical communication and ethical considerations technical authors have? If so, are there specific ways you do this in your teaching?*

JH: Of course, ironically, I'm a screen-up kind of guy. I don't really care so much what's going on the bottom. So much of what we're doing now is drag-and-drop technologies. You no longer need to know HTML5 to build a dynamic website. That doesn't mean you can't benefit from it, but that's no longer a one-to-one correlation. That's a very significant kind of thing. But coding can have dramatic impact in a way that is both rhetorical and beyond rhetorical. Despite the fact that I'm a screen-up guy, it's really critical to understand what happens below the screen because you can very well be manipulated, shaped, positioned, or pushed in ways without even having any awareness of what's going on.

What happens when we don't really ever question the interface and the choices it's given us? It's agenda setting if nothing else, right? It's also a process of automating intensive labor practices. I use this example in my class all the time to talk about the importance of what algorithms do and how they're changing the landscape:

One of the simplest things I can point to is photo filters. I assume you have a smartphone and you have some sort of photo app on it, right? One of the standard filters is a sepia effect. To actually make a sepia photograph is ridiculously labor intensive. You need the ink from a cuttlefish, you need a dark room, you need the right kind of materials, and the right kind of light exposures. It's insane in terms of how much time, and now I can do it in the blink of an eye. What's happening is that these algorithms—and this is just the production end, not even including the back-end coding and programming—on the production end, they are automating the master techniques. They're taking the advanced aesthetics of the master class and just giving it to you in the click of a button. That radically transforms how we think about mediating practices, production, and interface interaction. You don't have to have these skills in the same way anymore. As soon as an artist or a practitioner develops a really cool way of



representing something, it seems like just minutes before some company has made an algorithm for it, to mirror it, to map it.

The more you really start to understand how the algorithms are being applied in the programming, the coding structure, and how the program and code itself shapes or controls or enacts, the more you can become critically aware or attuned to what the technology is doing and how it's setting upon you. These things are small in practice and in theory, but the ramifications are, in some cases, global, depending on which technological structure you're dealing with.

I think anytime you use a technology and you want to allow students to work with it, you have to balance between how much knowledge I need to give them to be able to produce what I want them to produce, and to what extent should I make them aware of the operating conditions that are the underbelly for this technology. I try to do it as a little bit of both. It's always going to be class specific. When I teach my class in rhetoric and games, we talk about the procedural mechanics of a video game, as well as the fact that in most video games, you cannot have access to the code or the assets that make the game go because those are either patented or copyrighted or both. For teaching writing, when students compose primarily in Microsoft Word, I have students write with Google Docs once or with Scrivener on a trial account and see how radically different their writing is, and it's just simply switching interfaces. They [the programs] all do the same basic thing, but they do it differently with different assumptions.

### **Multimodal Composition**

*Xchanges: What place does multimodality have in the college composition classroom today? Has it expanded in the ways you would have liked or expected in 10+ years you've participated in this composition ecosystem as a professor of digital rhetoric?*

JH: When I interviewed at the University of Texas, I had just finished my PhD (about 2009). I'm interviewing and talking about all this weird, wonderful media stuff that I want to do in a classroom to help students and graduate students learn how to do multimedia and digital composition. An interviewer asks, "Who's going to teach these things? Who's trained to do this stuff?" Of course, my answer was, "Me. That's what I do." Me and a few other people at the time. Of course, the professor group is not that small at this point anymore. I teach with video games and I know others who do. Some people do really amazing things like mobile production, augmented reality, virtual reality, social media, web design. At this point in time, there's a larger set of folks in composition studies and rhetoric more generally who do things in and around the technological production side.

Digital rhetoric is rhetoric at this point. We're so saturated by the technology that to separate them is somewhat problematic already. You're right in wanting to say that not a lot of people are doing these things in the composition classroom, but at the same time, if we don't, then we're going to be operating notably behind where the majority of writing occurs.

While we don't all bring technical expertise, we bring rhetorical expertise. If you think it's late in the game, just give it a shot. You'd be amazed at what you can do.

View video clip 3 here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3IzCPU-bK8>

As scholars in rhetoric and writing or communication, the way in which we frame and understand how ideas take shape, those critical skills transfer across media and they always have. I think that you'll find that there's a lot more space for these weird technologically driven kinds of practices that reflect not only digital learning principles but challenge what it means to write. What it means to write today is inherently intertwined with the technologies we use. It's always been that way. It's just the technologies now have more agency than the ink pen.

What matters is not whether instructors can do all these things, but how they can help students understand how to apply the how-to-learn process in other realms. I've been thinking about this a lot: "What [ten years ago] did I really expect to happen?" We had this sense that technologies were going to continue to grow, become more ubiquitous, and be more prevalent, but I don't think anybody fully understood what was going to happen with like mobile writing, mobile production, and the app-based world. If I knew back then what I know now, I would have definitely been a lot wealthier.

We definitely knew that these technologies were going to play an increasing role for students' writing skills and capacities upon leaving school. Every job, even start-ups, needs a digital presence. They were going to need an ability to make a video, they're going to need to make audio content of some capacity because they're going to reach a different audience who's oriented in a different way. To that extent, I envisioned that more and more classrooms would take up with writing.

I really thought that by now more universities would have the digital writing component or digital literacy as a core curricular value, in the same way that they have writing, speaking, and math. I thought it would be more prevalent in terms of curricular development. There are universities that have done this and colleges that have done this. But, yes, I'm a little shocked that it hasn't become a curricular value. The sad part is, most universities recognize they need to develop these skills in their students. They have statements about it, they talked about like how, "We're at the leading edge in digital literacy skills. We're producing students who can hit the ground running in the industrial corporate



world with digital technologies," and yet it's not a fundamental part of their identity.

The more writing becomes digitally oriented, the less time you have for more traditional writing things. I mean I work at a university that, honest to God, still defines writing as words on a page. I teach intensive writing courses, and I have to meet the university requirements on what counts as intensive writing. I'm trying to make the case that even if it was just words on a page, it still includes design, layout, production, and orientation. It's never just been words on a page.

The fact that we define the sense of writing by word counts and a peer review process means we got half of it right. The peer review process is critical, and letting them revise and redesign is great, but students who can make amazing videos, or design a really informative web text, or learn how to write a series of blog post for critical or public service kind of things, that's just as much development of writing skill as is writing the essay. In fact, I'd say it's more relevant than the essay.

View video clip 4 here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvWA\\_FyUhEo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvWA_FyUhEo)

The essay model is actually a very brilliant model for when it was invented and what it was doing. Truth be told, if you can learn to develop and sustain the kind of extended engagement across what the essay is still designed to do, that kind of thinking, reasoning, and expression still produces a lot of critical value. But it's harder and harder for students to see how readily something like the essay and essay-based practices help them now and then transfer to other areas. It's not just transfer skills that I'm after. It's really critical awareness of the moves or strategies or maneuvers that work rhetorically in different contexts.

## Challenges of Digital Publishing

*Xchanges: What's been the most challenging issue(s) over time with THEJUMP+? Do they tend toward the technical, the archival, the human resources, or other area?*

JH: I'll start with the archival issue because I think it's easier and more important to how the field sees things. We are, by design, married to the archive drive. We really believe that things should be archived, they should remain forever into perpetuity, and that people should be able to access them forever. There's a lot of value in that, and it's important for a number of reasons. But if we do that, then that means the kind of work students produce have to be things that I can house and I can archive and I can control as a journal.

On the one hand, if that's the goal, then that causes all kinds of problems because the vast majority of things students can produce are in black box

corporate-owned software. If a student makes a really cool Wix project on wix.com, and I want to share this awesome interactive web text with other people, I can't publish it, because I can't host it. Wix owns it. So what we did was build masks on top of projects to add that kind of academic validity and a community around the projects. There's a number of projects that we have that we don't actually host on our site or on our various channels. They actually still belong on the corporate site of the student author. As long as that place is still operating, they're there. We just build a window over top of them. That's great, and I like that because then it lets students work with the technologies and tools they have available to them and they don't have to feel limited by not being able to do their own HTML5 coding or whatever the case may be.

The downside is that means we can't guarantee that all the projects will be archived forever. For example, I'm at a conference in Seattle couple years back and it's four in the morning, and I get a phone call from somebody in Michigan who is looking for a project that he uses in his classes every year, and it's no longer on *TheJUMP+*. What happened was that the faculty member who had run the site for the student's work he was looking for stopped working in academia and went into industry, and then her university website was shut down. She didn't copy the assets; they lived on the university's site. There was no way for us to get to the work. It was gone, like it was just "Poof," vanished. I understand that that's frustrating to people, and it does violate this archive drive. But at the same time, if we limit ourselves to only those things that we can house, we dramatically limit the students, the kinds of projects we can see and share from students that would make their rounds on social media, that would make their rounds in the world.

For me, the reality is I was less concerned about being able to look back 10 years from now and say, "Here's what we did 10 years ago," and more concerned about making sure people had a sense of what students are doing right now in classes across the country in this year or this past year.

Lastly and probably the biggest issue for me is building the system. *TheJUMP* has been built three times, or four if you count the prototype. I built a prototype in IWEB and then built the first operating version in Drupal. But I realized quickly that the only person who could make an issue in that system was me because it was built to my weird idiosyncratic practices. We rebuilt it after a couple years in the Drupal 6 platform. Later, I tried to rebuild it in an Indiana University system, and that was not going to work well because they were in the process of also updating their program. We were scheduled to try out Cheryl Ball's new Vega platform, but it wasn't quite ready for beta testing when we were, so I rebuilt it again from scratch in the WordPress platform.

I think we'll forever be undergoing this kind of transformation as the publishing tools improve and the platforms improve and the systems improve. We'll always want to try and try new things or re-brand ourselves for new market or new

purpose or new value. That is a definite labor-intensive kind of practice, particularly if there's a labor of one or one and a half. There's no metric for us helping people understand what that looks like. Those are my headaches, but they're good headaches because that means we're doing things well enough that people want to use what we have. They want us to maintain it, they want us to make it accessible, and they want it to be available and functional and aesthetic in ways that matters to them. I guess I'll continue to battle those things as long as people want them.

I never thought in a million years that I would learn nearly this much about the infrastructural back-end of digital publishing. So that's probably the biggest hurdle. It's not really a widespread issue for viewers, but again, those back-end choices, those coding choices, those platform choices, dramatically affect the aesthetics.

*View video clip 5 here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnxO4EXarsk>*