

## **‘Mr Popular Sentiment’ Conducts ... Dickensian Journalism Then and Now**

**John Drew and Tony Williams**

The interplay between the discourse of factual representation and that of ‘literature’, and the kinds of creative, imaginative redress the latter seeks to achieve in fictional terms, is never more complex in Dickens’s work than in the tightly printed columns of *Household Words* (1850–59) and *All the Year Round* (1859–95). For the social historian and student of culture, as for the literary critic, they are required reading, and immersion in their pages, in turn, gives the reader some sense of privileged access to a whole milieu: to the ‘groupthink’ of a cross-section of mid-Victorian Britain, or, if we may coin a term in the tradition of Raymond Williams’s attention to ‘structures of feeling’, its ‘groupfeel’.

*Dickens Journals Online (DJO)* was conceived and launched in 2006. Its intention is to bring to the widest possible readership two complementary versions of these magazines, which have never been reprinted in their entirety.<sup>1</sup> High-resolution facsimile images of the original pages, complete with all the paper imperfections, sweaty thumbprints, and the marginalia of readers over the years, are viewable side by side with an exact modern digital transcript, searchable, exportable, and capable of rendition into other forms, including the latest generation of computer-synthesized speech. All this to be done without forgetting that what is accessed can only ever be a simulation of a historical artifact, or we should become liable to the same kind of criticism levelled at Williams’s somewhat loose-limbed theory, and which he himself acknowledged, noting that ‘it is not possible to work back from texts to structures of feeling to experience to social structures’.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, working across from text identical with the original, to page images which are visual doubles of the original mechanical reproductions, offers a remarkably good simulation of the experience of reading *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* a hundred and fifty years ago. Viewed from within our current social structures, it gives, we hope, that kind of through-the-looking-glass reconstitution of those which obtained when the ink was still wet on the page, and which fills with delight the modern reader of Victorian letterpress. Another way of describing the main page browser of *DJO* would be to say it deliberately combines in one view the physical materiality of the ‘flip-book’ reader provided by the Internet Archive’s text library, with a slightly more sophisticated version of the ‘plain vanilla’ (but highly accurate, and searchable) texts provided by Project Gutenberg.<sup>3</sup>

Commenced with virtually nothing by way of an operating budget, *DJO* has clung to the principle of Open Access (OA), during a period when some millions of pages of out of copyright Victorian periodicals have been aggregated to commercial sites, and, even if made widely available through national libraries, must still be paid for by subscription somewhere along the line. The case for OA is now being cogently made at national and international level as a means by which ‘[r]esearchers can reach a greater audience and find that their work is more widely read and cited, institutions gain an enhanced reputation as their research becomes more visible, [and] funding agencies see a greater return on their investment’.<sup>4</sup> The only outcome *DJO* took into consideration from the outset was to aim for OA so that the largest number of people could use it, and in this it was guided by the Dickensian concept of a Cheap Edition: in this case, so cheap it would be free. Counterintuitively, so far as orthodox thinking about innovation and the market is concerned, other projects launched on the same ‘uncommercial’ basis have offered paradigms and groundbreaking features which *DJO* has sought to emulate. The *Internet Library of Early Journals*, *Old Bailey Online*, the *Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition (NCSE)*, the *Stormont Papers*, and the *Trove/Australian Newspapers Digitisation Program (ANDP)* have all been inspirational in aspects of their conception, design, or functionality.<sup>5</sup>

Also crucial to *DJO*’s development has been the California-based Internet Archive — like *Trove*, a large-scale free archiving project. In 2007, a collaborative agreement with *DJO* led to their scanning the project’s run of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* and hosting unprocessed ‘flip book’ versions of the results, together with uncorrected text files, in a designated collection within their text archive, from which the project gradually drew down and processed files, uploading them gradually to our own Joomla!-based open source content management system. The Charles Dickens Museum and the British Library generously made their copies of the rare supplements to *Household Words* available for scanning and presenting on the website, largely thanks to the not-for-profit OA ethos of the project. The latest collaboration of this kind — a technology cooperation/research and development project — is with a leading European text-to-speech company, the Acapela Group, who have provided a voice-streaming service capable of converting the contents of our text database (some 30 million words) into convincing speech synthesis, using their latest generation of British male and female voices.<sup>6</sup>

While it would have been interesting, and perhaps feasible, to attempt to deliver an online periodical entirely by means of zero- to low-cost collaboration, some direct funding has of course been necessary over the last five years. The University of Buckingham Foundation and Dennison Research Fund, the International Dickens Fellowship, and the Dickens Society all provided essential seed money at the outset. Numerous individuals constituting the ‘Friends of *DJO*’, also stepped in at an early stage to sponsor the digitization of nearly a hundred individual issues, via a payment portal on the University web pages describing the project. The Leverhulme Trust, one of the largest independent all-subject providers of funding for research and education in the United Kingdom, supported a two-year fellowship (2009–11) for work on the project — which has led, *inter alia*, to the drafting of detailed synoptic introductions to the biannual volumes of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, which feature in the archive.<sup>7</sup> It is also currently funding two postdoctoral research assistants (until the end of 2012) who are involved in all aspects of the work, but particularly in the indexing and classifying of individual articles. The project has also had recourse to recognizably Victorian methods of fundraising, offering a series of ‘instructive and entertaining’ evening lectures in 2009 and a Gala Dinner at Lincoln’s Inn in 2010, complete with raffle and auction. The blend of traditional with modern is well illustrated by the project’s latest supporter, the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists — the City of London’s hundredth and youngest livery company, recognized in 1992 — which is helping with the development of *DJO*’s text-to-speech synthesis interface during 2012. There is no doubt that our collaboration with individuals in all these organizations was catalysed and motivated throughout by the sentiment that delivering the resource in 2012 would be a fitting way of marking the bicentenary of Dickens’s birth. The excitement and interest shown by a whole cross section of bodies involved in the latter-day relaunch of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* presents a curious match to the ‘groupfeel’ surrounding their original composition and consumption.

Perhaps the most significant contribution, however, in terms of time, expertise, and commitment, has been made by the general public, who have responded with an enthusiasm and generosity far beyond our imaginings to the opening up of the archive to online correction of the raw OCR (optical character recognition) text processed from the original scanning of the journal pages. Our base text was about 98.5% accurate — perfectly readable, in one sense, and significantly better than what was achievable when

the *Internet Library of Early Journals* was commenced — but even so, this translated to about fifteen character misreadings per page, not including other imperfections (missed em dashes throughout the database, unnecessary spaces before and after punctuation, speech marks, etc.) which we wished to remove. Towards the end of 2010, the first release beta site was opened up to volunteer text correctors, with the first public demonstration of the interface made at the 2010 Dickens Day around which this special issue of *19* has been designed.<sup>8</sup> The response was enthusiastic, and through postings on a number of active nineteenth-century online discussion groups (including the Dickens List and VICTORIA) and in the *Dickensian*, *Dickens Quarterly*, and *Victorian Periodicals Review*, a small corps of dedicated volunteers built up. Each volunteer was able to select an individual 24-page weekly issue of either *Household Words* or *All the Year Round* to work on, from a total of about 1200, at which point the magazine was registered as ‘correction in progress’ and unavailable to others. On completion, the magazine was submitted for approval by the project director, and once it had been checked, was added to the ‘corrected’ pile. A progress chart was installed on the homepage, but — it must be admitted with hindsight — progress was slow: partly due to the relatively small number of volunteers at work, and partly due to aspects of the user interface which were less than perfect. Roughly six months into the experiment, by 22 May 2011, 88 of the magazines released for correction at that time had been completed, 44 were in progress, but a substantial 969 magazines (88% of the archive) remained unassigned. The 30 million words in the archive felt like a substantial mountain to climb.

A successful one-day postgraduate workshop and seminar built around the project and the field of Digital Humanities was held on 8 July 2011 at the Institute of English Studies, but although awareness of the project in academic circles increased, the situation by 18 July was not much different: 85.6% of the database was still uncorrected. We knew, however, from the pioneering work of the *ANDP*, and various exemplary research papers made available by that program, that large numbers of erudite and willing potential correctors might well be found outside academia, if only we could get the message out.<sup>9</sup> That August brought a small revolution. A letter to the *Guardian* on 3 August, calling more widely for volunteers, produced startling results, as, during this traditionally quiet time for British journalism, numerous other papers and radio programmes ran with the story — at times in a curiously exaggerated form — so that in one week, our call to arms had been seen on the front page of Spain’s *El Pais*, heard by BBC listeners across the

country and by local radio listeners in Kent, Ulster, Melbourne and Canberra, and read about in the *Observer*, *Independent*, and in various follow-up items in the *Guardian*, online and print. Hits on the website rocketed, and in an update to BBC Radio 4's *iPM* programme sent in for the 15 August show, we were able to report that only 2.9% of the database remained available for new volunteers. Since that date, ensuring that the many million words of proofreading which was undertaken is completed in a timely and accurate fashion has been a huge challenge, but fascinating and exhilarating, as time and again we have been amazed by the commitment, curiosity, and patience of our volunteers, who now number something over 3000.

Indubitably, this is a testament to the enduring readability of the magazines that Dickens and his small editorial team, week after week, melded into shape. Volunteers write regularly, inter alia, to report their sheer enjoyment of the material, and its variety. Only rarely — but healthily enough, for critical balance — is there a dissenting voice. One correspondent, for example, notes wryly of the garrulous house style:

The person who churned out the article I am currently checking writes: 'I must come to an end somewhere, inexhaustibly as I could run on, if I pleased.' I assume Dickens paid per thousand words?

The sense that, over the last twelve months, we have collectively been both re-editing Dickens's journals, as a community of online sub-editors, and re-encountering individual issues, as if for the first time, as readers, has subtly shifted our sense of the project's centre of gravity. The online text correction experiment was conceived as a means to an end — to see if we could provide *DJO*'s eventual readers and users with a 100% accurate archive, to optimize searching, and unlock research potential through various data mining techniques that become worthwhile with clean text. However, with 3000-plus enthusiastic volunteers already registered with the beta site, keen both to read and interact with the content, we have been wondering latterly whether this is not a thoroughly worthwhile end in and of itself. Even if the site were to have launched, as planned, on 29 March 2012 and receive not a solitary visitor beyond that point, the journey so far would have been thoroughly worth it.<sup>10</sup> By dint of a huge collective effort, and some careful planning, it was possible to sign off on the final magazine at 11.15 am on the morning of the Bicentenary (7 February 2012), and on the archive as 100% corrected. A smattering of that day's postings on the project's Facebook page gives an indication of some of the feelings of the volunteers:

‘Well done Everyone! It proves that working together brings success’ [...] ‘It’s been a privilege to take part. Thanks to all involved’ [...] ‘So proud and humbled to have been a tiny cog in this immensely important machine. Huge congratulations’ [...] ‘It’s been a treat being involved. Your work will bring benefit and pleasure to many for a long time to come.’ [...] ‘Thanks for the opportunity — it’s been a great experience, and an education’ [...] ‘Proud to have been a part of this fantastic project! [...] now all available for sharing ... :-)’

News of the completion reached 80% of our Facebook followers, and was shared or talked about by 20%, which is a dry statistical rendering of a fact very obvious to the project team, and strangely moving: despite never having met each other, and only having direct contact with two or three of us in the project office, our solitary volunteers considered themselves and us part of a large, affective community, and to have participated in something as publicly shared and emotionally felt as a Dickens reading.

Thus, to conclude this progress report, we hope it will not be impertinent to instigate a speculative connection between the relationship that obtains between the small team of *DJO* ‘staff’ (between two and four) and our body of volunteers whose interest in the site is currently sustaining it, and that which originally subsisted between Dickens’s editorial team and his journals’ original readers and subscribers. Both groups are imagined communities, whose individual members are not in direct communication with each other, but yet are seemingly spurred on and animated by the idea of their existence, and who act and respond with what can be perceived as solidarity. At the point of our interaction with our volunteers, whether broadcasting messages and generating emails, or writing by name to those we have never met, there is a strong sense of shared belief in the artifact represented by the texts Dickens and his colleagues worked on a century and a half ago: that these are still current and resonant writings.

The ‘groupfeel’ therefore of Dickens’s original readers seems curiously accessible, and present tense, through this latter day re-editing of the journals, as though Dickens’s understanding of popular feeling itself, as manifested in his management of his journals, is conducted across several generations, and is still perceptible. An anecdote of Dickens as editor, coming via a recollection of Wilkie Collins’s told to one of his own acolytes, the Manx novelist Hall Caine, is apropos, given that it was quoted in a preface the latter wrote for the relaunch of *Household Words* in 1902. Caine had apparently called on Collins shortly before his death, and

found my friend greatly excited by the prospect of publishing his next novel as a serial in one of the very humblest of cheap periodicals. A great illustrated weekly had offered a better price, but that counted, for nothing. ‘Think of it — three hundred thousand readers!’ I argued that they were not his readers, but the readers of *Jack Sheppard*, and of the wildest balderdash that could be put together. ‘All the better,’ said Collins. ‘They’ll be the easier to handle if I give them something worth having.’ [...] ‘But think of it,’ I protested, ‘you are giving up the best readers in the country for this unknown penny public.’ ‘That’s the worst of it,’ said Wilkie. ‘It’s such a pity it can’t be a ha’penny one.’

Then he told me how Dickens had hungered for the same audience; what faith he had in it; how he loved it; how honest he had found it; how quick to respond to the good and true; and how, when he had planned this periodical, he had felt like an organist who, touching a little key-board, sets a mighty instrument quivering and throbbing, and filling the air with music.<sup>11</sup>

Apocryphal or otherwise, the account presents in both musical and audiovisual terms the idea of Dickens the magazine ‘Conductor’ as concert performer, striking the notes that resonate with audiences: what later communications models refer to as the wavelength, vibe, or frequency. Not long after, Henry James would credit Dickens’s ‘sovereign periodical appearances’ with a ‘command of the permeable air and the collective sensibility, with which nothing since has begun to deserve comparison’.<sup>12</sup> Even if by now the advent of the Internet and web technology surely does deserve such comparison, it may also explain the affinity of Dickens’s weekly journals for this extraordinary medium. Whatever its future as an educational and research resource, *Dickens Journals Online* is, in this respect, merely a portal.

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<sup>1</sup> *DJO* <<http://www.djo.org.uk>> [accessed 27 April 2012] includes the two rare supplements to *Household Words*, the *Household Narrative of Current Events*, 6 vols (1850–55) and the *Household Words Almanac*, 2 vols (1856–57).

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> See <<http://archive.org>> and <<http://www.gutenberg.org>> [accessed 27 April 2012].

<sup>4</sup> ‘Why Open Access?’ <<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/openaccess>> [accessed 27 April 2012].

<sup>5</sup> Online, respectively, at <<http://www.rsl.ox.ac.uk/ilej/>>, <<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>>, <<http://www.ncse.ac.uk>>, <<http://stormontpapers.ahds.ac.uk>>, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>> [accessed 19 April 2012].

<sup>6</sup> <<http://www.acapela-group.com>> [accessed 27 April 2012].

<sup>7</sup> These essays are disseminated in three forms: on the website itself, in print-on-demand reprints of the biannual volumes of the journals made available by the University of Buckingham Press (<<http://ubpl.buckingham.ac.uk>> [accessed 27 April 2012]; forthcoming, 2012), and in *Dickens Quarterly*:

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see John Drew, Hazel Mackenzie, and Ben Winyard, 'Household Words, Volume I, March 30 – September 21, 1850', *Dickens Quarterly*, 29.1 (March 2012), 47–64.

<sup>8</sup> <[http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/our-research/research\\_cncs/our-events/past-events/dickens-day](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/our-research/research_cncs/our-events/past-events/dickens-day)> [accessed 27 April 2012].

<sup>9</sup> See Rose Holley, 'Many Hands Make Light Work: Public Collaborative OCR Text Correction in Australian Historic Newspapers' (National Library of Australia, 2009) and other project documentation online at <[http://www.nla.gov.au/ndp/project\\_details/](http://www.nla.gov.au/ndp/project_details/)> [accessed 27 April 2012].

<sup>10</sup> The launch took place at the international conference 'Charles Dickens and the Mid-Victorian Press (1850–70)', University of Buckingham; details at <<http://www.buckingham.ac.uk/djo>> [accessed 27 April 2012].

<sup>11</sup> Preface to relaunch of *Household Words* (1902). Cited by Paul Lewis, '1902: *Household Words*' on the *Wilkie Collins Pages* <<http://www.web40571.clarahost.co.uk/wilkie/biography/Caine1902.htm>> [accessed 27 April 2012].

<sup>12</sup> Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother* [1914], repr. as *Autobiography* (London: Allen, 1956), p. 251; cited in *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 623.