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King, Edmund, principal investigator. The UK Reading Experience Database

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[See table of contents](#)

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its other sites provide labels for their tiles, so we have to wonder if this is an oversight specific to REED: P&P.

Overall, REED: Patrons and Performances is a deep resource, providing an entry to a rich and carefully researched database. The underlying data is thorough and arranged logically, enabling multiple avenues of investigation. That said, we feel that this is a site that presupposes in its use a measure of subject matter expertise. Without domain knowledge, users may have trouble navigating not the site itself, which is well designed, but the content. There is good documentation, including instructions for how to search the site, but there is little descriptive content contextualizing the data. Some of this is mitigated by the drop-down lists on the search pages, which, while functional, also help to self-document several categories within the data. But this site does not follow REED Online's example of offering "How To" pages and "Editorial Materials" alongside the search records. Adding interpretive content is by no means necessary, as REED: P&P accomplishes what it sets out to do. However, highlighting featured results, adding guided tours, and telling interesting stories might help to attract and orient new and/or casual users. Without that piece, REED: Patrons and Performances is still a wonderful site, but it may be better suited for answering questions rather than generating them.

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The UK Reading Experience Database.

Milton Keynes, UK: Open University, 2007. Accessed 9 July 2020.

open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/index.php.

The UK Reading Experience Database (UK RED), housed at the Open University, is an open-access database that offers searchable records of the history of reading from the capacious timespan of 1450 to 1945. The scope and ambition of the project is at once its greatest point of interest and its most evident shortcoming. What is truly novel about the project is its attempt to establish a data-driven baseline of a history of reading that does not centre

on material objects—as in book historical databases that track annotating and collecting histories—but roots itself in a combination of primary evidence and secondary accounts of reading from sources as diverse as “books and newspapers [...] playbills and tickets [...] illuminated manuscripts, novels and poetry [...] tombstone inscriptions and graffiti” (“Home”).

The prospect of transforming such a variety of sources from across centuries into standardized, structured, and searchable data is daunting, and it is in the execution of this task that UK RED is hamstrung by its own scope and ambition, offering users a database that is intriguing to explore as a general user but difficult to use systematically for research. More significantly, UK RED is a legacy digital project whose profitability as a resource for new research avenues is limited by the fact that neither the data—which are skewed towards certain research interests by collection practices—nor the site are being actively maintained.

Technical elements

UK RED is immediately recognizable as a legacy digital project that bears the hallmarks of a resource developed piecemeal, alongside evolving technologies and without the benefit of guidelines for established best practices to which researchers today have access. One can approach reviewing a project of this type by presuming one of two goals: to provide guidance to principal investigators on improving the site, or to advise users on how best to navigate the site as it exists. Since neither the content of UK RED nor its underlying code (last change logged on 30 March 2007) indicates that it is actively maintained, this review will take the latter approach.

However, it is worth commenting on the status and future of legacy projects like UK RED. Digital humanities saw a flurry of start-up grants that gave rise to a generation of projects that languish for lack of sustained support—in funding, infrastructure, and staffing. Language of “sustainability” has eclipsed that of “innovation,” and the PIs of legacy projects must ask themselves how best to make their resources future-proof. The Endings Project at the University of Victoria offers the most comprehensive set of guidelines dedicated to practical strategies for tackling this particular challenge in a way that allows us to “invest in workable processes and technologies so we can collect, preserve and provide

user-friendly access for longer than the estimated 10-year lifespan of most current formats.”¹

The first clue to UK RED’s status as a legacy project is the presence of “.PHP” in the web address. PHP is a general-purpose web development language that is now twenty-five years old; sites built in PHP are functional but not especially amenable to interoperability. Additionally, outdated technical choices affect the project’s usability and accessibility. The site renders no differently on a tablet or mobile phone than it does on a laptop or desktop, a drawback in an era where researchers and students alike tend increasingly to use lightweight mobile devices. The site also lags behind the accessibility standards articulated by the Open University.² For example, all of the links in the top menu—“Home,” “Explore,” “Search,” “Browse,” “Wiki,” “About UK RED,” “FAQs,” and “Contact Us”—do not have enough colour contrast to meet current accessibility standards, nor do the small white links at the very top or the year links near the bottom.³

Additionally problematic for researchers is the fact that the site’s data export capability appears to be limited to downloading search results in a PDF rather than as structured data in a CSV, JSON, or similar file format, and that its guidelines for copyright and citation depart from the current best practices that stipulate that data should be freely accessible and code open-source: “Copyright of the UK Reading Experience Database (RED) and in the structure and design of the database belongs to the Open University (UK). [...] Prior written permission is required for any alteration or redistribution of the database, or a substantial portion thereof in any form, including electronic” (“Copyright and Citation Guide”). UK RED was designed for another era, a fact

1. “About Us,” The Endings Project, accessed 9 July 2020, projectendings.github.io/about. Individual digital humanities (DH) centres may offer their own documentation concerning project futures. This reviewer’s home institution, the Center for Digital Humanities at Princeton, employs a “Long Term Software Agreement”; it has been adapted by other universities like Carnegie Mellon, which instead envisions a “Five Year Stewardship Phase.” For Princeton’s documentation see *“Built by CDH” Long Term Software Agreement* (Center for Digital Humanities, Princeton University, 2018), doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3359203.

2. “The Open University website accessibility statement,” Open University, updated 19 September 2019, open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy-and-policies/policies-and-statements/website-accessibility-open-university

3. Thanks to Princeton DH developer Nick Budak for advising on accessibility and for this insight.

that is evident in nearly every aspect of the site and that places a ceiling on its usefulness for developing research.

Project scope and intended audiences

The statement on the home page of UK RED invites engagement by anyone with a general interest in its opening question, “What did United Kingdom residents and British subjects living or travelling abroad read between the invention of the printing press in 1450 and the end of the Second World War in 1945?” (“Home”). The democratic ethos of the project is echoed by its intention to capture “the reading tastes and habits of the famous and the ordinary, the young and the old, men and women” (“Home”). It is a great asset of the project that it seeks to recreate the intellectual and social experience of reading from the perspective of more than a select few elites, and it is in this potential to broaden our understanding of who is included in the history of reading—and therefore the history of social and political attitudes, consciousness, and behaviour—that UK RED offers new avenues of inquiry. It is in many respects a site designed to foster the kind of instances of reading—across a diverse population—that it catalogues across history.

The diversity of readers, historical and modern, extends to different nationalities, and on this point the site introduces both intellectual and practical confusion for users. For researchers of earlier time periods, the application of the terms “United Kingdom” and “British subjects” to such a long temporal span is particularly disconcerting for its apparent elision of the complexity of shifting concepts of nationhood, foreignness, and subjecthood, along with their attendant political struggles. There was no “United Kingdom” until the passage of the Acts of Union in 1707, and there may be no more vexed concept over the timespan included in the database than that of “British subjecthood.” A related issue arises in the notion of “living or travelling abroad.” The status of an English person living in Wales, Scotland, or Ireland—or the Channel Islands—might, depending on the time, be that of someone “living abroad” or not; this is even more true in instances of colonial establishments like Canada or the American Colonies.

Here and elsewhere, the database framework relies on a common understanding of shared terminology among users that ought not to be presumed, in particular for general users unfamiliar with the complexities of

British history across the period in question. The site's usability would have been improved by either a glossary of key terms or an essay giving contexts for the evolution of these terms and the questions—and significant political actions—that surrounded them and that necessarily informed the reading experiences chronicled. This could join the existing set of essays offered on the “Exploring” page hosted on the Open University's OpenLearn site, or it could be included as a separate page.⁴

The concluding paragraph of the home page statement further complicates the relationship of UK RED to nationality, acknowledging the somewhat arbitrary nature of “national borders” and referring users to “linked” partner projects, yet the only link is to the home page of the international version of RED which, in turn, links back to UK RED.⁵ The relationship of UK RED to other seemingly defunct RED projects caused repeated confusion to this reviewer and would, no doubt, to general users and researchers alike.

Usability

In addition to its opening statement, the home page features a link to the copyright and citation guide, a box with keyword search and browse, and a timeline feature on “Reading through the centuries.” The feature works well as an invitation for the general user to explore and browse the site by linking to a single reading experience (presumably chosen by the PIs) from the start and end of each century. The keyword search invites further exploration by enabling what is akin to focused browsing that allows a user interested in, for example, *Paradise Lost* to discover related instances of reading. The browsing

4. The essays can be found on the “Exploring” page: open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/explore_exploring.php. An example of the practice of supplementing a database (where terms must be fixed and defined) with analytical essays engaging with the complexities and potential problems with such key terms can be seen in Nick Budak, “Representing Gender in the Shakespeare and Company Project,” Shakespeare and Company Project, Princeton University, updated 27 March 2020, shakespeareandco.princeton.edu/analysis/2019/12/representing-gender-in-the-shakespeare-and-company-project. (Full disclosure: this reviewer is part of the team that built the website and advised on the essay in question.)

5. The international version of RED describes the project as a “collection of databases whose aim is to accumulate as much evidence as possible about reading experience across the world.” However, logos and links for partner projects are missing here, too. See “Welcome to RED, The Reading Experience Database,” The Reading Experience Database, Open University, accessed 9 July 2020, open.ac.uk/Arts/reading.

options offered—by reader or author—feel more intimidating, and the lengthy lists of names provide a glimpse at the data underlying the project, which is revealed in even greater detail by the search page.

The search function offers a dizzying array of filter options that raises the question of whether there is enough structured data available to support such specific searches. Sample search results—also focusing on *Paradise Lost*—helpfully refine the results of the keyword search, but applying more than two to three filters effectively excluded most results. The search functions best for a specific research question by a user with existing disciplinary knowledge. It is difficult to imagine a general user interacting easily with the search given the specialist and potentially alienating research terminology employed.

There is very little transparency about the standards and practices applied to the data underlying the site. The “FAQs” page defines a “reading experience” as “a recorded engagement with a written or printed text—beyond the mere fact of possession” and welcomes “evidence of all sorts of reading.” The list of “common types of evidence” is extensive, not to say overwhelming: “diaries [sic] entries and letters describing reading, annotations, marginalia, autobiographies, memoirs, commonplaces books, biographies, witness statements, court records, census reports and interviews by social investigators” (“FAQs”). It is difficult to imagine that the amount of underlying data from such diverse sources, spanning such a large swath of history, has been provided with the kind of robust data structure that would be required to standardize it.

Further details on the source of the data confirm this impression; it is extremely difficult to find documentation of data provenance, structure, and curation standards. The project’s “About UK RED” page cites “30,000 records of reading experiences of British subjects, both at home and abroad, and of visitors to the British Isles, between 1450 and 1945.” Details on the data collection process, however, were only available on the project page housed at the Faculty of Arts, which describes the database as “open to unsolicited public contributions” from volunteers who “have been inspired to contribute entries based on their own personal interests” and who have, in total, “contributed nearly a fifth of all entries.” The standards and practices that contributors adhere to are not mentioned, though members of the public “receive guidance and training from RED project members, and often develop considerable expertise

in handling and interpreting documentary sources.”⁶ The materials that RED project members would use in such a training are not discussed.

Standards for research data management, particularly in the humanities, have evolved substantially since UK RED’s establishment, and the lack of documentation about data collection, standardization, and curation is both a sign of its age and a substantial drawback to scholars looking to benefit from the site. UK RED’s data bias towards particular fields of study, centuries, or historical figures is evident in the search results but not flagged for users anywhere in the discussion of volunteer participation. Particularly with an open-source project that relies on public contributions, it is crucial to inform users of the project team’s data sources and practices so that they are better able to understand not just the results they encounter but the results they may be missing. UK RED’s records are far from comprehensive, and researchers using the site should be made aware of this major caveat.

Overall, the site supports both general users, with its ability to browse and discover, and scholarly researchers with targeted searching. It has the potential to enrich new research or open avenues to inquiry by scholars who were previously unaware of its existence—particularly in its democratizing approach to reading history—but its continued ability to do so in light of the fact that neither the data nor the site itself are updated or otherwise actively maintained is of necessity somewhat limited. UK RED’s project description admirably aspires towards comprehensiveness, but its actual scope remains restricted. Researchers should use with caution and not rely on the database as an authoritative or comprehensive resource, because it is not actively updated or maintained.

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6. The quotations in this paragraph are from “The Reading Experience Database (RED), 1450–1945,” open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/index.html.