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A Digital *Flying Dutchman*: The Afterlife of an Open Educational Resource as a Public History of Exploration

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Abstract

This article describes a free, online resource developed in conjunction with a second-year subject taught at a university in regional Australia. It examines the foundations of that subject, the ambitions of the resource developed, and the afterlife of an Open Educational Resource (OER) developed for a subject that has since been disestablished. It discusses the potential of digital public history, analyzing the opportunities for (and obstructions to) publishing in non-traditional formats.

KEYWORDS Pacific exploration; Australian exploration; Open Educational Resources; Open Access; digital public history

Cet article décrit une ressource en ligne gratuite, conçue dans le cadre d'un cours de deuxième année dispensé dans une université d'une région rurale d'Australie. Il examine les fondements de ce cours, les ambitions de la ressource développée et le devenir d'une Ressource Éducative Libre (REL) créée pour un cours désormais abandonné. Il aborde le potentiel de l'histoire publique numérique, en analysant les opportunités (et les obstacles) liés à la publication dans des formats non traditionnels.

MOTS CLÉS Exploration du Pacifique, exploration Australienne, Ressources Éducatives Libres, libre accès, histoire publique numérique

Introduction

The Open Educational Resource (OER) *Beyond Cook: Explorers of Australia and the Pacific* was not always adrift as a stand-alone foray into digital public history.¹ Although always intended to appeal to a broader audience, it was initially developed to support the teaching of “HI2006: Australian and Pacific exploration” (HI2006), a subject taught to second-year students at a regional university in Queensland, Australia, for fifteen years. That subject attracted both local students intrigued by exploration as a historical topic and visiting international students who required Australian content while studying abroad. HI2006 embraced the idea of encounter rather than exploration and followed Pacific and New Zealand historical and anthropological trends of viewing explorer accounts as needing to be read against the grain in order to understand the events that unfold within their pages. Over the course of the subject, students came to appreciate the ability of modern scholars to distinguish Pasifika, Māori, and Indigenous Australian perspectives and concerns within explorer texts, and of Pacific peoples to represent their own views of encounter history. European explorers emerged from their own accounts as very partial observers with biases arising from their cultural contexts and physical situations, and by the end of the course students were able to critique explorers’ actions and the contents of their journals with reference to their larger historical context.

In 2022 HI2006 was distilled into an OER titled *Beyond Cook*. A cross between a textbook and a website, this work was made freely available online. In 2023 HI2006 was disestablished. Like the *Flying Dutchman*, a fictional vessel doomed to remain forever at sea after the captain cursed the wind and turned away from safe harbor, *Beyond Cook* sails on. Unlike the fictional vessel, *Beyond Cook* has proved popular with the general public, has been identified as a resource for use in tertiary subjects at other institutions, and its content remains current.

This article examines the afterlife of a digital artifact developed after years of engagement with students. It identifies the scholarship used in the creation of the original university subject and discusses its reception by tertiary students. It assesses the innovative publishing outputs and quiet activism possible within OERs. It then uses the analytics attached to digital outputs to gauge public engagement with a publication originating in tertiary teaching practice and analyzes the ways in which such a publication does not sit neatly within institutional publication expectations. Finally, it discusses the potential of digitization projects and open access resources to support new forms of scholarship.

Teaching Exploration at James Cook University

James Cook University (JCU) is a largely science-focused, comprehensive university based in tropical north Queensland. Established in 1970 by an Act of Parliament,

¹ Claire Brennan, *Beyond Cook: Explorers of Australia and the Pacific* (Townsville: James Cook University, 2022). <https://jcu.pressbooks.pub/beyondcook/>

named for an explorer, and with a documented commitment to the tropics, it seemed an excellent institutional home for a history subject examining exploration and its legacies.² Such a subject was established in 2006, in part based on a course examining Pacific exploration previously taught at the University of Auckland.³ The subject's location informed its approach and content. Taught at an institution located on a coast of the Coral Sea, bounded by the Great Barrier Reef, and on the edge of the sparsely populated tropical region of Australia, the subject examined both maritime and overland exploration. This combination of topics highlighted links between the exploration of the island Pacific and the coastline and (eventually) the interior of the Australian continent. In addition, including a significant Australian element in the subject made it attractive to study abroad students seeking to fulfil Australian content requirements, making HI2006 financially viable within a small set of humanities and social sciences courses offered at a regional university.

HI2006 was a subject about encounter rather than exploration. Its handbook description deliberately problematized the notion of European exploration of already inhabited places, and the listed subject learning outcomes clearly identified explorers as unreliable narrators whose accounts could, nonetheless, be mined for glimpses of Indigenous societies and the ways in which they responded to contact with the cultures of Europe.⁴ This approach is long-established within New Zealand and Pacific historiography, arising from the application of anthropological understandings to historical texts and the presence of Māori and Pasifika concerns and voices within written histories of the region.⁵ As early as 1963 historian Niel Gunson noted the wide range of records of early contact in the Pacific, the challenges inherent in their interpretation, and their potential to support nuanced and multi-faceted historical interpretations of that period.⁶ Historian W. H. Pearson's article "The Reception of European Voyagers on Polynesian Islands, 1568–1797" provides an excellent example of the insights available through a re-reading of voyage accounts by historians able to imaginatively affiliate themselves with the shore rather than the ship, and it was published in 1970.⁷

The writing of Pacific history in the context of the Pacific rather than Europe was sufficiently well established by 1977 that New Zealand historian of the Pacific Kerry

² James Cook University of North Queensland Act 1970 (Queensland). https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/qld/repealed_act/jcuonqa1970447.pdf; James Cook University of North Queensland Act 1997 (Queensland). <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/pdf/2017-10-13/act-1997-045>; and James Cook University. James Cook University Corporate Strategy. (Townsville: James Cook University, c.2022), <https://www.jcu.edu.au/about-jcu/strategic-direction/corporate-strategy/2022-JCU-Corporate-Strategy.pdf> p.3.

³ That subject was taught by Hugh Laracy, and while it no longer exists its theoretical underpinnings are described in the obituary of its developer: Damon Salesa, "Hugh Laracy," *Journal of Pacific History*, 51, no. 1 (2016): pp. 43–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2016.1164284>

⁴ James Cook University, "HI2006 – Australian and Pacific Exploration," in *James Cook University Subject Handbook*, 2018.

⁵ Salesa, "Hugh Laracy," pp. 44–45.

⁶ Niel Gunson, "A Note on the Difficulties of Ethnohistorical Writing, with Special Reference to Tahiti," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 72, no. 4 (1963): pp. 415–19.

⁷ W. H. Pearson, "The Reception of European Voyagers on Polynesian Islands, 1568–1797," *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 27 (1970): pp. 121–154. Similarly, Pearson's slightly earlier article: W. H. Pearson, "European Intimidation and the Myth of Tahiti," *The Journal of Pacific History* 4, no. 1 (1969): pp.199–217.

Howe could analyze it as a coherent historiographical approach. Howe argued that the “savage” found in older works about the Pacific lived only in European imaginations. In 1977, Howe was already able to celebrate the emergence of island-oriented histories that recognized Pasifika as intelligent actors with coherent worldviews of their own.⁸ By the time Pearson’s analysis of early contact between Europeans and Polynesians was critiqued by historian I. C. Campbell, the value of interpreting the behavior of Islanders in the contexts of their own societies and worldviews was standard within Pacific studies. Campbell’s criticism of Pearson’s analysis hinged on the recognition of the range of such societies and worldviews present within the Pacific Ocean basin and demonstrated the nuance and depth of analysis possible when writing the history of Pacific encounter.⁹ Australian historian of the Pacific Greg Denning contributed to this historiography with his 1980 book *Islands and Beaches*, and demonstrated its continuing ability to offer new insights into cultural contact with his influential *Beach Crossings*, published in 2004.¹⁰ Similarly, in 2003, Australian historian Inga Clendinnen’s *Dancing with Strangers* demonstrated the power of the approach when applied to early encounters in eastern Australia.¹¹ Recent advances in technology have served to enhance Indigenous voices by lowering cost barriers to publication. In particular, cheap recording technology and free to use online video repositories have increased opportunities for those outside the academy to offer commentary and disrupt Euro-centric histories.

However, despite being a well-established approach in scholarly circles, reading voyage accounts critically remained challenging for students taking HI2006. Many students came from a non-humanities background and were informed only by popular accounts of explorers and their exploits. Drawing on the scholarly body of work that “read against the grain,” each week students in HI2006 were required to read an extract from an explorer’s journal and discuss what it revealed. The subject reading material also included reproductions (later links to digital reproductions), of European maps representing European understandings of the Pacific. The inclusion of primary source material was intended to demonstrate to students that voyage accounts could act as clouded portholes, allowing glimpses both of the locations visited and of the visitors themselves caught in these impromptu mirrors. In many ways the subject instead demonstrated to the subject’s tutors that the portholes were close to completely opaque and hosted reflections almost completely incomprehensible to undergraduate students: at the start of the subject students struggled to engage with historical sources, even those that had been popular in their own time. One student commented that the language of an eighteenth-century

⁸ K. R. Howe, “The Fate of the ‘Savage’ in Pacific Historiography,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 11, no. 2 (1977): pp. 137–154.

⁹ I. C. Campbell, “European-Polynesian Encounters: A Critique of the Pearson Thesis,” *Journal of Pacific History* 29, no. 2 (1994): pp. 222–31.

¹⁰ Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas, 1774–1880* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1980); and Greg Denning, *Beach Crossings: Voyaging across Times, Cultures and Self* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Publishing, 2004).

¹¹ Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers: Europeans and Australians at first contact* (Melbourne, Vic: Text Publishing, 2003).

journal required it be read with a pirate accent if it were to be understood, and many questioned quite what adventures their informants could be describing, generally being confounded by allusions to sexual interactions with local women, as well as by the challenges of navigating a ship through uncharted waters while unable to determine its longitude with any exactitude.¹² Despite initial consternation, students generally responded to encouragement and rose to the challenge the subject posed, developing some adeptness in critical (or possibly cynical) reading of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works. Late in the subject, students engaged with an extract from New Zealand anthropologist and historian Anne Salmond's *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, and with the complex (and very foreign) worldview of the eighteenth-century sailors manning the vessels of exploration.¹³ By this stage of the subject, students had generally developed the skills to both peer out through the clouded portholes provided by written voyage accounts, and to appreciate the images of the European sailors that could at times be glimpsed as reflections within them. In addition, they had ventured beyond the confines of the ships and discovered knowledge belonging to the shore in the form of memories and interpretations deriving from non-European participants, descendants, and scholars.

While it was pragmatic concerns that led to the inclusion within the subject of a section examining the exploration of the Australian coastline and Australian interior, that inclusion deepened the subject's examination of the relationship between exploration and imperialism. Although it was challenging to include both maritime and overland exploration within a single subject, treating the exploration of the Australian coast as an extension of Pacific maritime exploration worked well for students and accurately reflected the concerns of navigators. The Dutch might have charted the western edge of the continent in order to avoid it; and after crashing into it on his first voyage to the region, James Cook might have avoided the Australian continent on his second Pacific voyage and only paused briefly in what is now the island of Tasmania on his third; but the web of personnel, problems, ambitions, and technologies involved in voyages to the island Pacific extended to catch in the coastal and then inland exploration of the Australian continent. This interconnectedness can be perceived in the career of William Bligh, who served with Cook on Cook's third Pacific voyage, and went on to experience mutiny both as commander of a Pacific voyage (the famous mutiny on the HMS *Bounty* in 1789) and as governor of the colony of New South Wales (the "Rum" Rebellion of 1808; Bligh had arrived to administer the colony in 1806). Bligh charted regions of the Torres Strait and the coast of what is now Tasmania, as well as serving within the Pacific and as an administrator in the Australian colonies.¹⁴ Similarly, Matthew

¹² The problem of determining longitude was not fully resolved during the period covered within the subject: Claire Brennan, "Land and Sea: The Significance of Named Places in Digitally Mapping Historic Ocean Voyages," *M/C Journal* 27, no. 5 (2024), n.p. <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.3100>

¹³ Anne Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog: Captain Cook in the South Seas* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2003).

¹⁴ A. G. L. Shaw, "Bligh, William (1754–1817)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 1, ed. Douglas Pike, (Canberra: National Center of Biography, Australian National University, 1966). <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bligh-william-1797/text2037>.

Flinders served with Bligh on the HMS *Providence* 1791–1793 voyage to Tahiti and later undertook extensive charting of the coastline of the Australian continent.¹⁵

The opportunity to examine the contrast between the experiences of visiting navigators and overland explorers arose from the desirability of including Australian material within HI2006 and proved valuable in problematizing the expected outcomes of exploration, and its relationship with settler colonialism. The penal colony at Port Jackson (since grown into the city of Sydney) was established before the outline of the Australian continent had been mapped, and at a time when there was still hope that New Holland to the west was not part of the same landmass as New South Wales to the east.¹⁶ The relationship between exploration and colonization intrigued students taking HI2006, as convict settlers were deposited in little-known harbors with unknown hinterlands. As European explorers set off overland to explore the colonies already established on paper, students came to appreciate the benefits of the ship as a means of mobility, a defensible structure, a platform for science, and a transportation device for crew, cargo, and collections.¹⁷ The comparison of maritime exploration with overland exploration, and of periodic European visitation with settler colonialism within a single subject was a departure from the usual separation observed between Pacific and Australian studies, but comparative study of the two regions deepened student understandings of both.¹⁸

Beyond Cook

Before its spectral afterlife, *Beyond Cook* was launched as a state-of-the-art experimental vessel built during the JCU Library pilot of JCU Open eBooks powered by Pressbooks.¹⁹ It exploited that publishing platform's ability to link original content and existing digital artifacts in the creation and sharing of OERs. Operating within a regional university without a privileged student body, JCU Library was concerned about escalating costs for students and subsequent decreasing access to commercially published material. The Pressbooks platform has allowed JCU Library to enact its commitment to ensuring equitable access to learning for all students, following the lead of North American academic libraries and higher education institutions which

¹⁵ H. M. Cooper, "Flinders, Matthew (1774–1814)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 1, ed. Douglas Pike, (Canberra: National Center of Biography, Australian National University, 1966), <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/flinders-matthew-2050/text2541>.

¹⁶ Kenneth Morgan, "A Historical Myth? Matthew Flinders and the Quest for a Strait," *Australian Historical Studies* 48, no. 1 (2017): pp. 52–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2016.1250791>

¹⁷ The subject included explicit analysis of this concern, drawing closely on the work of Brennan and Sorrenson: Claire Brennan, "The Physical *Endeavour*: How a Wooden Ship Shaped Cook's First Circumnavigation," *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 105, no. 2 (2019): pp. 135–58, <https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/61464/>; and Richard Sorrenson, "The Ship as a Scientific Instrument in the Eighteenth Century," *Osiris* 11 (1996): pp. 221–36. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/368761>

¹⁸ Claire Brennan, "Writing the More-Than-Human History of Northern Australia's Many Waters: Environmental history, the blue humanities, and the challenge of entanglement," in *Critical Approaches to the Australian Blue Humanities: Nurturing meaningful relationships in discontinuous environments*, eds. Maxine Newlands and Claire Hansen, Routledge Environmental Humanities (Routledge, London, UK), pp.47–48.

¹⁹ James Cook University, "JCU Open eBook," accessed October 31, 2025, <https://jcu.pressbooks.pub>; and Pressbooks, "Welcome to Pressbooks Directory," accessed October 31, 2025, <https://pressbooks.directory/>.

promoted OERs as viable alternatives to commercially produced textbooks. The benefits to students are not just cost, but the full availability of OERs from the first day of being assigned, updates that take hold immediately and universally, and continuing access after graduation (when traditionally students have sold or discarded potentially outdated textbooks).²⁰ UNESCO has provided leadership in promoting OERs and driving global adoption, and academic libraries are advancing this movement by supporting OERs to improve student learning.²¹ In a regional university, avoiding imposing costs on students is a significant act, promoting equity and inclusion in higher education.

Beyond Cook was a vessel designed to explore the key ideas driving HI2006, rather than strictly a subject textbook. Building *Beyond Cook* was an opportunity to critically examine Australian and Pacific exploration as a history of encounter in an open access format targeted at an interested general public that made use of digital material, and it drew strongly on the precedent set by *The Conversation*.²² Each “chapter” presented a relatively short (approximately 1200 word) text on a topic relevant to effective, critical reading of the explorer journals, relevant images with captions that explained their significance, and links to items that extended the chapter’s analysis. Those items, amassed in the teaching of an undergraduate subject, included videos, freely available scholarly secondary sources, primary sources in the form of both published journals and maps, and a list of key secondary sources that were behind paywalls or found only in print. *Beyond Cook* was a foray into digital public history, intended to provide intriguing tools so that general readers could engage with historical concepts and concerns. The inclusion of embedded video sources allowed authentic expression of a range of views relevant to the content, including strong Australian Indigenous, Māori, and Pasifika voices that spoke to the view from the shore. In this way, *Beyond Cook* sought to prepare a reader to engage with primary source journals, made accessible through the provision of links to digitized copies. Readers were supported in developing critical skills and drawing out the ways in which, when read carefully, the records explorers left reveal glimpses of Oceania, Australia, and Europe in the period in which they were produced and aid in understanding the nuances of encounter history.

The most significant cost of producing an OER within the Pressbooks system is the time of the staff involved. Academic experts require time to create high-quality OER content, while library professionals play an essential role in ensuring these materials meet standards for accessibility, visual design, copyright compliance,

²⁰ Deanna L Cozart, Erin M. Horan, and Gavin Frome, “Rethinking the Traditional Textbook: A Case for Open Educational Resources (OER) and No-Cost Learning Materials,” *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 9, no.2 (2021): pp.1–17, <http://dx.doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.9.2.13>; and Ahmed Tlili et al, “Are open educational resources (OER) and practices (OEP) effective in improving learning achievements? A meta-analysis and research synthesis,” *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* (2023): pp.1–24.

²¹ Gema Santos-Hermosa, “Impact and Implementation of UNESCO’s Recommendation on Open Educational Resources in Academic Libraries: SPARC Europe Case Study,” *Research in Learning Technology* 32 (2024): pp.1–22, <https://doi.org/10.25304/rlt.v32.3183>.

²² Conversation media group, “Who we are,” *The Conversation: academic rigor, journalistic flair*. Accessed October 29, 2025; Combining academic rigor with journalistic flair: The Conversation UK’s journey - European Journalism Observatory - EJO.

metadata, and overall quality. During the development of *Beyond Cook*, JCU Library's Pressbooks subscription allowed for unlimited publication output, with no restrictions on the number of works JCU Library could produce and no cost associated with the generous use of color images within a text. However, the text needed to be written, academic reviewers spent time considering its content and improving its rigor, and experts within the JCU library spent time giving advice and checking compliance around copyright and referencing and managing the production process in terms of design and metadata.

As a result of freedom from the vast majority of production costs associated with producing printed works, OERs often engage in quiet activism unavailable to authors who must provide a safe financial return to their publishers. Business academic Bronte van der Hoorn and language academic Adriana Díaz have both noted the possibilities of this new form of publication in terms of the potential to include interactive elements, a wealth of color images, and interactive media items that cannot be reproduced on paper. Both also noted that the absence of a requirement for a publisher to profit from their work allowed them to publish without commercial constraints, and without an established track record of commercially successful books. And both noted the activist tendencies of their work: van der Hoorn was determined to prevent a paywall springing up between her students and their study materials on graduation, while Díaz aimed to present students with a more inclusive view of Spanish-speaking communities.²³

Historians tend to be subversive (the term "revisionist historian" is close to tautology), and *Beyond Cook* is activist scholarship. However, its activism remains diplomatic, while attempting to fundamentally reframe the way in which its readers consider the process of exploration. It does not risk alienating readers using it as a form of rational entertainment by being unnecessarily confrontational but rather seeks to present post-colonial views in a non-threatening context. It both queries the European worldview represented by the explorers in their records, and critiques historical interpretations of their encounters with the places and peoples of Australia and the Pacific. In addition, *Beyond Cook* extends the history of exploration beyond the exploits of European explorers. Its fourth section looks at silences in the journals around the involvement of historical actors who were not European males, and (subtly) raises questions about how to read historical records. Its fifth section looks at the long history of exploration in the regions of Australia and the Pacific (in places that history dates back millennia) and examines public and academic engagement with reconstructed Pacific voyages and with Australian deep time, exploring the connections between heritage and history, between politics and burgeoning interest in certain aspects of the past.

²³ Bronte van der Hoorn, "Why I started writing an open text and why I'm glad I did!" *CAUL Enabling a Modern Curriculum* (blog), March 25, 2022, <http://moderncurriculum.caul.edu.au/2022/03/25/why-i-started-writing-an-open-text-and-why-im-glad-i-did/>; and Travis Wall and Adriana Diaz, "Interview with Language OER Author Dr. Adriana Diaz," *Pressbooks* (blog), February 10, 2022, <https://pressbooks.com/language-learning/interview-with-language-oer-author-dr-adriana-diaz/>.

From Academic Endeavor to *Flying Dutchman*

In 2023, one year after the publication of *Beyond Cook*, HI2006 was taught for the last time. *Beyond Cook* will remain hosted by Pressbooks and available for online reading and download, and its afterlife is already longer than its period of association with HI2006. However, unlike the letters to the dead from the captain and crew of the original *Flying Dutchman*, the content of *Beyond Cook* has been willingly accepted by a range of institutions and readers.²⁴ *Beyond Cook* resembles the *Flying Dutchman* in being the semi-tangible remains of past concerns, and in representing possibly mis-spent effort on the part of its steersman, but in contrast to that vessel *Beyond Cook* is not greeted with dread by those who chance upon it.

Beyond Cook has proved difficult to scuttle, and a range of metrics can be interpreted as beacons signaling continued existence rather than flares signaling distress. The vast global library catalog WorldCat indicates *Beyond Cook* is held by 85 libraries (13 in Australia).²⁵ When patrons search topics related to *Beyond Cook* in the catalogs of any of these 85 participating libraries, it materializes among their search results, and they can click to connect with its JCU Open eBooks instance. *Beyond Cook* also materializes in response to relevant Google searches, although internet patrons may be directed to its less complete manifestation in ResearchOnline@JCU, where it lacks some functionality. In addition, JCU Library continues to ensure that *Beyond Cook* is discoverable through key OER-specific repositories, including Pressbooks Directory, Open Textbooks Library, and OER Commons.²⁶ These directories are designed to link the original instance of an OER with a global audience, and *Beyond Cook* engagement metrics suggest readers are locating and accessing it using these platforms.

Despite data fragmentation and the difficulty of interpreting limited metrics, Table 1 provides evidence that *Beyond Cook* is a persistent phantom. While most of the readers recorded above arrived via Google, *Beyond Cook* also haunts the curricula of academic institutions. The *Beyond Cook* landing page includes a self-nomination form designed to track adoption by educational institutions. While to date only two higher education institutions from the United States have submitted the form, referral data confirms that the text has been recommended to students at the University of Hawai'i and other analytics indicate that many readers are discovering the publication through platforms such as the Open Textbook Library and OER Commons.

²⁴ While not the first print reference to the *Flying Dutchman*, the 1821 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* story is the first fully fleshed out description and account of the origin of the vessel: Wikipedia, "Flying Dutchman," accessed October 29, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Dutchman; and "Vanderdecken's Message Home; Or, the Tenacity of Natural Affection," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 9, no. 50 (May 1821): pp. 127–131, https://archive.org/details/sim_blackwoods-magazine_1821-05_9_50.

²⁵ Worldcat, "About WorldCat.org," accessed October 31, 2025, <https://search.worldcat.org/about>.

²⁶ Pressbooks, "Welcome to Pressbooks Directory," accessed October 31, 2025; Open Textbook Library. "Open Textbook Library." Accessed November 1, 2025; OER Commons. "OER Commons." Accessed November 1, 2025.

Table 1 *Beyond Cook* analytics.

Data type and source	HI2006 period (2022 and 2023)	<i>Flying Dutchman</i> period (2024 and 2025)
Total visitors (Koko Analytics)	1046	3062
Total pageviews ²⁷ (Koko Analytics)	3013	5254
Full text downloads (Koko Analytics and ResearchOnline@JCU analytics) ²⁸	383	1756
Top 5 countries for access (Google Analytics)	Australia, United States, United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand	Australia, United States, United Kingdom, China, New Zealand

JCU Library has further enhanced the accessibility of *Beyond Cook* by integrating a “Translate this Book” feature powered by Google Translate, allowing readers to read the publication in any of 243 languages. Such translations are helpful rather than perfect but still serve to significantly broaden the reach of the work, and Google Analytics shows active engagement with translated chapters across a wide range of languages, highlighting the global reach of this publication.

Digital Opportunities and Digital Dangers

During its famous circumnavigation, the *Endeavour* came close to shipwreck on a number of occasions. That it carried its crew, collections, and observations safely back to Europe marked a significant achievement, rather than an inevitable outcome.²⁹ Similarly, digital projects are not assured safe passage, although they offer new views and affordances that are worth pursuing despite the risk of sudden or systemic failure. Communicating research using the new OER format carries the risk that the scholarship involved goes unrecognized, while uncertainty about the long-term stability of open access means that digital works themselves may vanish, and that projects dependent on open access components may cease to work as intended.

OER authors tend to prioritize accessibility for their work over recognition by their institutions. Both van der Hoorn and Díaz noted the ways in which OER publications do not fit neatly within the ways in which universities currently assess research. Van der Hoorn directly critiqued the use of university publication metrics as a measure of value. She noted that her OER was accessible and useful to readers in a way that a highly ranked journal article was unlikely to be. She also explored her

²⁷ Page views result both from engagement with a particular chapter, and from engagement with the download available on the cover page. As a result, some “page views” represent engagement with the entirety of the work after download, rather than a single page.

²⁸ From August 2024 downloads became available through Researchonline@JCU as well as through the Pressbooks site. The figures provided include downloads from both sources for the later period.

²⁹ Brennan, “The Physical *Endeavour*,” pp. 152–154.

motivations in producing a work that would not advance her institutional metrics: it made her feel as if she were realizing her ambitions as an academic to profess her research findings fully.³⁰ Díaz’s enthusiasm for her OER derived in part from the possibility that it could be continuously updated, extended, and revised; such flexibility is common among digital artifacts, but troubling to those compiling publication statistics. Díaz deliberately challenged “the notion of knowledge as static and hierarchical and of ‘traditional textbooks’ as monolithic, de-contextualized and prepackaged,” instead seeking to include students in her “organic, iterative, non-linear, often unpredictable, cumulative” creation of knowledge.³¹ In doing so she identified challenges for the assessment of research quality in an era of digital artifact production: challenges that suggest current methods that assess scholarly outputs in ways appropriate only for print media may discourage scholarly innovation and engagement with a wider public. However, some OER authors have reported successfully incorporating their open publishing efforts into narratives about their teaching within promotion applications.³² In addition, anecdotally, OER authors observe that reader engagement with an OER can lead to increased visibility of their research profile and traditional research outputs, potentially leading to increased citation.

Such difficulties in assessing digital artifacts as research outputs are not limited to any one discipline, and while some steps have been taken to engage with the issue, it remains unresolved.³³ In Australia, the Australian Research Council (ARC) introduced the category of Non-Traditional Research Outputs (NTRO, often pronounced “nitro”) as a way of recognizing the value of research outputs that fall outside print formats. However, the category tends to recognize research outputs in the form of creative works and exhibitions, rather than digital formats. The most recent Australian Research Council report on the use of NTRO designation within the humanities and social sciences uses data from 2018. That data shows the use of the designation for creative outputs, and within the discipline field “Studies in Creative Arts and Writing” 48.9% of research outputs are NTROs. The next highest proportion of NTROs is within the discipline “Built Environment and Design,” where only 11.9% of all research outputs fall within the category. On the ARC site digital artifacts are not listed among the forms that NTROs might take, limiting the usefulness of the category in recognizing new forms of research communication. The traditional publication formats of journal articles and books remain standard, and across all the Humanities and Social Sciences research outputs recognized by the ARC, only 6.9% are NTROs.³⁴

³⁰ Van der Hoorn.

³¹ Wall and Diaz.

³² Case studies of successful reporting of OER publication are presented in Andrew McKinney (ed), *Valuing OER in the Tenure, Promotion, and Reappointment Process*, Online: Pressbooks, 2024, <https://pressbooks.cuny.edu/tenureandpromotioncasestudies/>.

³³ Claire Brennan, “Digital humanities, digital methods, digital history, and digital outputs: history writing and the digital revolution,” *History Compass*, 16, no. 10 (2018): pp.6–7, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12492>.

³⁴ Australian Research Council, *Non-Traditional Research Outputs (NTROs)*, State of Australian University Research 2018–19 2019, <https://dataportal.arc.gov.au/era/nationalreport/2018/pages/section1/non-traditional-research-outputs-ntros/>.

Works produced using the OER format are not eligible for NTRO status and are generally not considered research outputs. While some OERs produced under the Pressbooks banner are clearly textbooks (and some are modified versions of other Pressbooks, updated to reflect institutional differences) others are products of research and of a determination by academic authors to use new means to engage audiences, both through visualization and interactivity, and through avoidance of publishing paywalls. There is no mechanism to recognize them as such. Thus, OER authors experience the same challenges as academics using the blog format to communicate their findings. Blogs have been adopted by a wide range of academics as a means of making their work accessible without the barriers and delays inherent in traditional publication.³⁵ And similarly to the lack of institutional recognition for OERs, blogs are not formally valued as publications despite in many cases being the equal of journals. In 2012 the library blog *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* surveyed its members and chose to begin identifying itself as a journal rather than a blog.³⁶ The decision to change category was pragmatic and involved very little real change in production: the process of peer review was made more transparent (it was not new). The organization behind the blog had had the foresight to use an ISSN from its inception, meaning no change was required. Instead, the most significant change was that the site began referring to its own content as articles rather than posts.³⁷ The shift in status was a response to author concerns that publication within a journal was more prestigious (and more likely to support promotion) than publication within even an award-winning blog.³⁸ Rather than attempt to win institutional recognition for flexible, fast, digital publication methods, the librarians involved in that enterprise instead found a way to fit within traditional research metrics.

OER authors have demonstrated their willingness to forgo institutional recognition for their work, but there are other challenges in producing digital public history. The production of *Beyond Cook* was made possible by large digitization projects that made published explorer journals and maps freely available online. Significant digitization has been undertaken, but the ongoing costs of digitizing collections, maintaining those digital copies, and managing public access are considerable. In 2023 the National Library of Australia's digital portal and aggregation site Trove was again threatened by budget cuts which were only narrowly averted.³⁹ More

³⁴ Australian Research Council, *Non-Traditional Research Outputs (NTROs)*, State of Australian University Research 2018–19 2019, <https://dataportal.arc.gov.au/era/nationalreport/2018/pages/section1/non-traditional-research-outputs-ntros/>.

³⁵ Ana Stevenson, Kieran Balloo, and Alana Piper, "How To Do Academic Blogging," *Public Humanities*, 1 (2025): pp. 2–4, <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.12>.

³⁶ In the Library with the Lead Pipe, "About." In the Library with the Lead Pipe: An open access, open peer reviewed journal. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/about/> (accessed August 25, 2022).

³⁷ Ellie Collier, "And the Survey Says . . ." In the Library with the Lead Pipe: An open access, open peer reviewed journal. Accessed August 25, 2022, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2012/survey-says/>.

³⁸ "About." In the Library with the Lead Pipe: An open access, open peer reviewed journal. Accessed 25 August, 2022.

³⁹ Georgia Roberts, "Trove secures funding as federal government comes to rescue of National Library of Australia's digitized archive," *ABC News*, April 3, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-04-03/funding-for-trove-announced-by-federal-government/102177488>.

recently, significant digital collections have been targeted by hackers, and AI crawlers have forced institutions to react in ways that make access to their collections slower and more difficult.⁴⁰ A series of attacks on Internet Archive in October 2024 led to nearly a month of disrupted service and revealed the fragility of volunteer-led digitization projects.⁴¹ That attack also revealed the limited number of digital copies in existence, as services including the Biodiversity Heritage Library depended on Internet Archive’s digital copies for use within their sites.⁴² Even without such ill-intentioned attacks, some formerly accessible documents are no longer freely and reliably available online.⁴³ Repositories are experimenting with ways to counter new online threats and to support their digital collections and digitization projects, but significant challenges continue to arise. The increasing challenges in cyber space raise interesting questions about the longevity of free access to scholarly publications and projects, despite ongoing commitment by librarians and others to open access and free exchange of information.

Conclusion

HI2006 drew on well established, Pacific-based scholarship in teaching its students to tease out the observations present in explorers’ accounts of their exploits. It recognized Indigenous people’s agency in their engagement with explorers, and it sought to interpret their interactions with Europeans in ways that recognized their coherent world views, their intelligent pursuit of their own interests, and their lively curiosity about the new situations they found themselves in and the potential benefits that might be derived from the new technologies suddenly available to them. It sought to make audible a wide range of voices, and to recognize concerns of agency and sovereignty. After a lifespan of fifteen years the subject was disestablished, but it left behind its own account of its ambitions and the tools it used to achieve them in the form of an OER, *Beyond Cook*. That OER played with the digital tools now available to educators both in the form of video material that allows authentic voices to be included in instructional material, and in the form of digitized primary sources that made exploration accounts and maps available even to students based in regional Queensland. Since the demise of HI2006, the OER has continued to make that material available to an even wider audience,

⁴⁰ Confederation of Open Access Repositories (COAR), *Open Repositories are Being Profoundly Impacted by AI Bots and Other Crawlers: Report from COAR Survey*, June 3, 2025, <https://coar-repositories.org/news-updates/open-repositories-are-being-profoundly-impacted-by-ai-bots-and-other-crawlers-results-of-a-coar-survey/>.

⁴¹ Brewster Kahle, “Learning from Cyber Attacks,” *Internet Archive Blogs* (blog), November 14, 2024, <https://blog.archive.org/2024/11/14/learning-from-cyberattacks/>.

⁴² J. J. Dearborn, “BHL Technical Development: Year in Review,” *Biodiversity Heritage Library* (blog), February 4, 2025, <https://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2025/02/bhl-technical-development-year-in-review-2024.html>.

⁴³ *Beyond Cook* lists Howe’s “The fate of the ‘savage’” as an open access secondary source, but in the period since 2022 that article has fallen behind a paywall. Published in 1977 in a New Zealand journal it is not readily found in Australian library catalogs, and it is at risk of falling into obscurity in its new residence within Project Muse.

demonstrating both the public appetite for histories of exploration, and the potential for academic authors to extend their teaching beyond the walls of their home academic institutions.

Digital tools are both fragile and surprisingly robust. Revisiting *Beyond Cook* in the course of writing this article revealed that some of the sources that once were freely available are no longer so. The back issues of one journal, digitized by its host institution, now lie behind a paywall when previously they were freely available. Perhaps that institution underestimated either the currency of its scholarship or the cost of hosting digitized copies. The 2024 Internet Archive outage resulted in a cascade of blocked access to scanned primary sources as other online collections revealed their dependence on the digital artifacts made available through a small, volunteer organization. However, *Beyond Cook* sails on, and the vast majority of its links continue to function. That continuing functionality is a testament to the determination of university libraries, other repositories and individuals that make such a wealth of material available. As a digital *Flying Dutchman*, *Beyond Cook* remains afloat due to the generosity of JCU Library in support of open access scholarship, and due to the foresight and commitment shown by repositories across Australia and the world that work to make copyright-free digitized material freely available.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.