

Guidelines for the Professional Evaluation of Digital Scholarship in History

American Historical Association

Ad Hoc Committee on Professional Evaluation of Digital Scholarship by Historians

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1. Overview and Rationale

The context of historical scholarship is changing rapidly and profoundly. Thanks to the emergence of new means of communication and information, historians routinely conduct research in digital libraries, use digital tools in their teaching, and participate in conversations on digital networks. The National Endowment for the Humanities, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and other supporters of the discipline provide support for groundbreaking historical scholarship executed in digital media while many colleges and universities have created centers and laboratories to foster innovation across the humanities.

Despite this ferment, widely accepted standards or guidelines for the professional evaluation of these types of projects have not yet emerged to accommodate these widespread changes. Digital scholarship receives varying levels of formal recognition when scholars are hired or evaluated for tenure or promotion. That disconnect, in turn, discourages scholars at all levels from taking full advantage of the new capacities that surround us.

The American Historical Association has established this committee to help ensure that our profession acts in far-sighted ways as the digital presence grows. Most concretely, it seeks to help clarify the policies associated with the evaluation of scholarly work in digital forms. More broadly, the goal of the Association and of the committee is to align our best traditions with our best opportunities.

Because academic contributions in the emergent digital environment can take many forms, the AHA has asked the committee to examine not only “work that can be seen as analogous to print scholarship that is reviewable by peers (i.e. journal articles and books), but also to address the myriad uses of digital technology for research, teaching, pedagogy, and even some that might be described as service.”

The AHA puts forward “a broad working definition of digital history” as “scholarship that is either produced using computational tools and methods or presented using digital technologies.” That definition will embrace a steadily growing proportion of historical scholarship in coming years, and so it is important that departments, chairs, and committees develop a clear understanding of these developments.

At its heart, scholarship is a documented and disciplined conversation about matters of enduring consequence. Hiring, tenure, and promotion involve peer-based judgments evaluating the significance of a scholar’s contribution to one or more of those conversations. Because scholarship is always evolving, departments should continually adapt their policies and practices to take advantage of new opportunities. In the same ways that historians have broadened their expertise to embrace many new subfields over the last several decades, so we must expand our understanding of the rapidly evolving digital environment to take advantage of the possibilities and opportunities it presents.

2. Prologue: forms and functions of digital scholarship

Digital scholarship takes many forms and so will departments' judgments regarding that work. Some digital publication can be very nearly indistinguishable from print publication in every respect but its medium. A high-quality, peer-reviewed journal article or long-form manuscript published only in digital form is the equivalent of a similar publication printed on paper. A historian whose expressive and methodological practices differ very little from print-era scholars should carry no special burden for explaining why his or her work appears in digital form save to provide basic information about practices of peer-review, editorial control and circulation that any scholar might be asked to supply about any publication during an evaluation process.

Other digital publication, by contrast, may signal methodologies, argumentation, and archival practices that differ from print practices. For those historians, an interest in digital media and tools may stem from a more substantial shift in the methodologies they use to work with archival evidence, oral testimony, or other source material. They may turn to digital media primarily for its potential to support a communicative transformation, providing new ways to connect the professional work of expert historical scholarship with the ways in which wider publics memorialize, represent, and engage history.

Digital history in various forms, in other words, may represent a commitment to expanding what history is, and can do, as a field. Some historians who take a strong interest in digital media and information technology, or who choose to work exclusively in digital environments, should be evaluated in terms of their overall ability to use sustained, expressive, substantive, and institutional innovation to advance scholarship. This is a commitment that may be scholarly in some instances, pedagogical in others, or represent a collegial commitment to the profession of history.

Some scholars may seek to incubate genuinely new approaches to historical reasoning. Those strategies might include new digital short-form genres such as blogs, social media or multimedia storytelling, participating in strong activist forms of open-access distribution of scholarly work, or creating digital platforms and tools as alternative modalities of scholarly production.

Wherever possible, historians should be ready to explore and consider new modes and forms of intellectual work within the discipline and to expand their understanding of what constitutes the discipline accordingly. The shared commitment of all historians to the informed and evidence-based conversation that is history can smooth our discipline's integration of new possibilities. With agreement on the purpose of our work, new and varying forms of that work can be seen as a strength rather than an impediment.

3. Guidelines

Any search or promotion process that is described as open to or requiring digitally-based scholarship needs to embrace at a fundamental level the possible, even the probable, appearance

of highly qualified candidates whose preferred practice of digital history significantly challenges print, and perhaps other forms of disciplinary orthodoxy. For their part, scholars who embark upon digital scholarship have a responsibility to be as clear as possible at each stage of conceiving, building, and sharing that scholarship about the ways that the digital medium contributes to their contribution to the scholarly conversation. Historians whose use of information technology produces new methodological capacities and modes of analysis need to provide explanatory narratives as a prelude to the professional evaluation of their scholarship by disciplinary colleagues. Even departments not explicitly hiring a digital historian need to reckon with digital engagement in the discipline and to be prepared to face the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities it provides.

Accordingly these guidelines make recommendations for departments, for individual digital historians, and finally for how the AHA can help to promote digital scholarship in the discipline.

Responsibilities of departments

Departments of history may wish to begin by asking themselves the following questions:

1. How are your department and your institution responding to the opportunities and challenges presented by the emerging digital environment?
2. How is your department planning to evaluate work presented as part of promotion, tenure, or other review in a digital medium?
3. Do your hiring plans include positions that involve research and publication employing the use of digital media?

After these initial conversations, the AHA recommends that departments explore their situation more deeply. The AHA recognizes that most departments will not be able to address all the following points immediately. Some departments may wish to form committees to address the issues, others may wish to start addressing them in the course of their regular meetings, and this process may take some time. But given the likelihood that most departments will eventually face the question of how to evaluate digital work, and to integrate such work into its spectrum of activities, consideration of these issues should begin before actual cases present themselves.

- They may wish inform themselves about developments in the digital context of our work. Most colleges and universities have staff in place whose job it is to monitor and promote new technologies. Librarians, in particular, have long been involved in professional conversations regarding new technologies of teaching and scholarship. Many of them will be delighted to hold workshops and address faculty in groups or as individuals.
- Before hiring and encouraging fellow historians who have responsibility for fostering these capacities, it is advisable that chairs and committee heads specify what will count as scholarly contributions toward tenure and promotion. Departments should review and

revise written guidelines that define the expectations of ways that colleagues might use digital resources, tools, and networks in their scholarship.

- Digital scholarship should be evaluated in its native digital medium, not printed out for inclusion in review materials. Evaluators need to understand how a project works, what capacities it possesses, and how well those capacities perform. This can only be done by actually using the interface.
- Departments may wish to consider how to evaluate as scholarship the development of sophisticated digital tools
- Departments need to consider how they will deal with work in a digital medium which exists in a process of continual revision, and therefore never exists as a “finished” product.
- Since digital scholarship often includes collaborations, departments should consider developing protocols for evaluating those collaborations (see Appendix B), which may include co-authored works, undergraduate research, crowdsourcing, and development of tools.
- Departments without expertise in digital scholarship may wish to enlist colleagues who possess expertise in particular forms of digital scholarship to help them evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the work before them.

Responsibilities of scholars

Individual scholars doing digital work in history will need to consider their own set of questions:

1. How would you explain your use of digital means to accomplish your scholarly goals and the commitment of time and energy you will invest in that work?
2. How will your department and institution support and evaluate digital scholarship?
3. What are your plans for dissemination, sustainability, and preservation?

Once you have answered these questions, the AHA recommends the following:

- Before initiating a digital project and throughout the course of the project, you should be prepared to explain and document its development and progress and its contributions to scholarship. These statements should be discussed with chairs and committee heads to make sure everyone is operating with the same expectations.
- Bring colleagues into your project, taking advantage of opportunities to explain how your work contributes to the scholarly conversation in on-campus forums, professional meetings, and print or online publications. If you establish collaborations and alliances make sure your department and institution is fully informed at each step.

- Determine the bearing your department's and institution's processes and procedures for evaluating and supporting digital scholarship will have on your plans.
- You should be clear at each step about the expectations of deadlines, final products, and evaluation. Historians who are experimenting with new forms need to be especially clear about what they are doing, why they are deviating from standard practice, and what challenges their work presents to their colleagues.

4. *The American Historical Association's Role*

The AHA has long sought to advance the possibilities for scholarship in all forms. Over the last two decades, a series of presidents have focused on the opportunities afforded by digital tools and networks, the organization's *Perspectives on History* has featured projects and overviews, the *American Historical Review* has experimented with articles that contain digital components and added reviews of digital scholarship, and the Annual Meeting has featured venues for the presentation and discussion of digital history.

Building on this work, the AHA will increase its advocacy on several related fronts. The first step is this committee itself, which will work collaboratively with departments to help clarify just what needs to be done and why.

The committee further recommends that:

- The AHA gather historians experienced in digital scholarship into a working group that will keep itself informed of developments in the field and make members available to departments looking for expert outside reviewers for candidates at times of tenure and promotion.
- The AHA should consider this working group as a resource that could also help to foster conversations using AHA Communities, and produce regular pieces for *AHA Today* and *Perspectives on History* related to digital scholarship.
- The AHA consider sustaining a curated gallery of on-going digital scholarship so that historians can learn directly from one another as they conceive, build, and interpret new forms of scholarship.
- The AHA should consider working with the editor of the *American Historical Review* to implement more regular reviews of digital scholarship, means for featuring digital projects, and peer review of those projects.

5. Appendices

Much of the work in digital scholarship in the humanities is project-based and is in this way akin to research that leads to more traditional outputs. The scholar or team begins with a research question, identifies sources, gathers and interprets data, and ultimately produces a final product to communicate the answer to the question. While there are similarities to traditional forms of historical scholarship and publication, the roles that scholars can play and the potential outputs are much more varied. The appendices that follow are meant to supplement the guidelines and provide some starting points for departments that are considering factors that will help with evaluation of projects and the scholarly work of digital history.

Appendix A: Project types

Large-scale collaborations: These types of projects can involve many different types of work and roles over a several years. They are often grant funded and include participants from several institutions. In some cases projects such as these combine a research focus with infrastructure development (e.g. digital tool creation). Project leaders are usually senior academics or managerial staff (library, IT), but these projects often employ early career academics in a variety of roles such as transcription, data collecting, project management, outreach. Departments hiring early career staff should be open to the kinds of knowledge and skills that can be developed working on these projects. While the work done by early career scholars on the project isn't always directly related to their field of study, the experience they gain can be a valuable addition to a department.

Small-scale web-based projects: Smaller projects abound in the realm of digital scholarship. They can be often just an historian who has experience developing websites or using particular tools, or a collaboration between a few individuals. Usually they are either unfunded or have received a modest amount of funding. As with traditional publications these projects are usually driven by a research question. In some cases the website allows the researcher to both gather and present information, often through visualization. Examples of this sort of project include [Geography of the Post](#) and [Visualizing Emancipation](#).

Digital media for communication about scholarship: This category would include individual and group scholarly blogs, and the use of social media for scholarly means. The scholarship being presented is not necessarily transformed by digital technology but the use of new media might help in showcasing research, connecting with other scholars working on the same field, public and classroom education, etc.

Teaching focused use of digital tools: There is a growing use of digital tools in the classroom at all levels, but especially with undergraduates. This is occurring across the curriculum, not only in classes that are explicitly focused on digital history. It can take a variety of forms, including assignments requiring students to write blogs, collaborative or individual website development, or crowdsourcing. Utilizing widely-used applications such as spreadsheets and databases in history education is also potentially valuable. See <http://mcclurken.org/> and <http://michellemoravec.com/> for examples of work in this area.

Use of digital tools as research aid: Projects that use digital tools and methods for source collection, management, and analysis can result in either traditional or digital publications. The use of digital tools is, in many cases, about the application of new methodologies to traditional modes of historical inquiry. Major methodological areas in which this is currently a factor include tools for textual analysis (e.g. text mining, natural language processing), historical geographical information systems, network analysis, and data visualization.

[This list could ultimately be linked to a curated and peer-reviewed gallery of digital history on www.historians.org, to allow individuals and departments to view exemplary projects of a variety of types. These examples would be vetted by members of the AHA's committee on digital scholarship on an ongoing basis and updated to reflect and illustrate current practice in digital history.]

Appendix B: Collaboration and project contributions

Most digital history projects require some collaboration. In history our traditional means for evaluating a scholar is based upon individual achievement, so departments should be prepared for this by developing or adapting protocols from other institutions or fields of study. In some cases this will involve collaborative working similar to that which occurs with co-authoring and is therefore akin to current practices. Some work undertaken by historians on collaborative projects will take forms that, while valuable contributions may not be easily assimilated into evaluative practices in our discipline.

In both tenure decisions and promotion it is vital that a department be open to collaborative methods of project development and communication. Almost no digital projects are done by a single individual. As a result, departments must develop an awareness and acknowledgement of the kinds of collaborative work that allows individuals to contribute in different ways to the scholarly conversation in history.

Just as the department should be prepared for how to evaluate this work, individual scholars should be thinking about how their work contributes to the disciplinary conversation. It will not be obvious to colleagues how certain roles on collaborative projects contribute to historical scholarship so it will be necessary for scholars to make this clear.

What follows is a partial list of the types of roles and contributions that are common in digital projects. It is meant to be a growing and dynamic list that will evolve over time. Further work will be done to identify the key features of these positions and describe how the work is a contribution to the discipline.

Roles:

- project management
- software development
- conceptualization
- gathering of evidence/data
- transcription
- data scrubbing

- markup/tagging/annotation
- grant writing

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