

[SLIDE: TITLE]

Fostering Change: Evaluating Digital Scholarship for
Professional Credit

In England, November 5th still commemorates the thwarted 1605 plot by a group of prominent English Catholics to blow up the House of Lords and assassinate King James. **[SLIDE: FIREWORKS]** Today, Guy Fawkes day, or Bonfire Night as it is often known, is mostly an excuse for entertaining families with bonfires and fireworks, and it has lost much of its political meaning. But it has a long and significant history related to the celebration of a Protestant nationalism that defined English identity for hundreds of years. In early modern England, where conflicts between Catholics and Protestants shaped much of the politics of the period, November 5th quickly became an important date in the calendar.

[SLIDE: GUNPOWDER PLOT] It was a moment for reflection on the English monarchy and divine providence, and it was celebrated in public spaces and churches. Often preachers would give sermons that focused on politics and religion. On November 5th in 1622, one

such sermon was given by the famous metaphysical poet John Donne, who at the time was Dean of St Paul's cathedral in London.

[SLIDE: DONNE]

The text of Donne's sermon survives and is now available digitally via the web to anyone who should care to read it. But reading a sermon allows us, 395 years removed from Donne's preaching, only a limited understanding of the event at which it was delivered. Sermons like this were public performances.

Performances that educated, entertained, fostered community, and espoused political positions. In order to fully understand their impact we need to consider how they were experienced by contemporaries.

This where digital history comes in. Digital tools now allow us to explore the experience of attending Donne's sermon in new ways. Doing just that is something the literary scholar John Wall and his colleagues at North Carolina State have devoted a lot of research and software development time to over the past few years. **[SLIDE: VCSPC]** The Virtual Saint Paul's Cross Project, has built a remarkable virtual model of Saint Paul's churchyard on that November day in the seventeenth century.

The model provokes thought about what it was like to attend a public sermon in 17th-century London and to experience dimensions the text cannot illuminate. The development of the models required extensive syntheses of the history of early modern London. The researchers modeled that day's weather using historical data, consulted contemporary accounts of the number of spectators in the churchyard to estimate the size of the crowd, and researched Donne's oral style.

The project has created a visual and auditory model that allows users to view the churchyard, which was one of the most important public spaces of early modern London, in 3D, from a number of different angles. Wall and his colleagues at NCSU also worked with a team of sound engineers who modeled the acoustic properties of the churchyard, taking into account such considerations as the weather, the number of people attending, and the construction materials of the cathedral and other surrounding buildings. The viewer can choose different places within the churchyard from which to listen, and the sermon sounds different in each location. **[SLIDE: AUDIO]**

While there is a website that provides documentation and explanation as well as access to the audio files and still images, and the videos are available on YouTube, the model was primarily created to be experienced in an immersive digital theatre in the library at NCSU. This limits the number of people who can experience it, and it also raises questions about the extent to which the work can be compared to a more widely disseminated publication. On the positive side though, experiencing it in the space in which it was designed to be viewed is far more engrossing than one could hope to achieve on the web alone.

However one experiences it, this model gives the user a highly developed, multi-layered account of the event. Technology makes possible a descriptive mode that transcends language, bringing visual and auditory elements to bear in the creation and presentation of knowledge about the past.

[PAUSE]

Before I get into talking about the evaluation of digital scholarship I want to look at another example of digital scholarship that encourages us to look at an aspect of history in ways that provoke

thought and refigure our understanding of the past. Digital scholarship takes many different forms. Some of which approach the past through methodologies and argumentation that depart from traditional historical methods. For these scholars and projects the use of digital tools and media often stems from a substantial shift in the way they represent the past.

Big data approaches have garnered the bulk of the attention, in digital history and other strands of the digital humanities. Including a fair amount of negative attention—such as that in a fairly widely discussed piece from last week in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In English departments and digital humanities centers that have focused on literary computing, methodologies drawn from linguistics have been adopted and adapted by scholars of literature and applied to the literary canon of published sources. These approaches can add a valuable set of tools for analysis of these texts. But they are limited by what has been digitized either by Google Books, or in many cases from microfilmed published sources.

Both the Virtual St Paul's Cross project and the other example I'm going to give in a minute arise out of an impulse to push the

boundaries of what history can be. When we approach topics with sustained attention on phenomena such as space, place, and sound, or when we create data from hitherto hidden archival sources we open up possibilities for a more inclusive, democratic, and humane digital history.

The two projects that I use as examples in this talk make a contribution to their field. This is a central point of my talk—digital history that makes such a contribution must be considered scholarship regardless of the medium used for its publication. At the American Historical Association our goal in developing and publishing guidelines for the evaluation of this work was to help overcome some of those challenges by supporting the discipline as it creates structures for evaluation and formal recognition of digitally enabled scholarship. In doing so we aim to encourage digital scholarship in history and embed the use of these tools and methods in how historians do their research, teaching, and publication.

As scholars make the shift to doing and publishing scholarship using digital tools and methodologies our disciplines need to address these changes, and when I say “our disciplines” I mean we

need to adapt. Even though digital methods have been used in the humanities for more than two decades, we continue to see it as a marginal practice, and therefore have not integrated it into the reward structures that govern advancement in the discipline of history. In order to ensure that we take advantage of these new modes of inquiry and communication we need to align our best traditions with our best opportunities.

While much digital history pushes the boundaries of disciplinary practice, it is often rooted in long-established historical and historiographical questions. And this brings me to my other example. The history of race relations is of course a central problem in any work on the U.S. Civil War. In the years following the war the U.S. Army occupied the south and played a vital role in Reconstruction up until the 1870s. Many freed slaves looked to the occupying U.S. Army to defend their rights. **[SLIDE: FREEDMAN'S BUREAU]** But what did the occupation mean in practice and how effective was it at defending those rights?

Detailed information about the location of army posts, troop numbers, and types of troops can be difficult to find. Even with the

information, it can be problematic to interpret what it meant.

[SLIDE: MAP] *Mapping Occupation*, a project developed by Greg Downs and Scott Nesbit, attempts to tackle some of these discovery and interpretive issues by providing a geographical interface that is focused on exploring these questions. The GIS map takes information from a dataset that Downs created during the research for his book on military occupation of the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction. The website displays it in a visualization that maps the locations in which troops were stationed and provides information about the number and types of those troops.

[CLICK LINK]

The site provides multiple routes into the data. These help the user to understand the reach of the occupying armies and their ability to police and defend the rights of freed blacks in the southern states. It allows the user to view how occupation changed from May 1865 through December 1880 through an animated timeline. The interface also gives options that show how much access freed people had to the army and how much area each outpost controlled. More recent additions to the site allow the user to layer other kinds of data on to the map.

Maps are a powerful means for visualising historical change, especially with the affordances of interfaces that allow for animated changes to the map. While in the wider discipline few historians think of their sources in terms of data, the act of creating historical data is central to the enterprise of digital history. Through turning historical documents into a dataset that can be visualized, the *Mapping Occupation* project reorients our understanding of the Army's role and potentially changes our view the realities of Reconstruction America. The analysis in this project requires a willingness and a facility for thinking about how to derive data from historical sources. Thinking about our sources as data, and creating data from historical sources opens up possibilities for understanding the past in new ways.

Projects like the two I've talked about (and I will conclude this talk with another in a few minutes) raise a number of important questions including:

[SLIDE - QUESTIONS]

- 1 - How is digital scholarship changing what it means to publish?
- 2 - What is the role of peer review?

3 - How do we provide professional credit for new scholarly forms?

Scholars are producing large and important “publications” in forms that are making use of digital tools, and we need to be asking and answering the questions that I’m raising here. When you think about the kind of cultural interventions that, for example, Ta-Nehisi Coates has been able to make through web-based writing or look at some of the interactive and interpretive possibilities that digital scholarship and publication allows, it becomes clear that the possibilities for advancing knowledge are both myriad and exciting.

Scholarly societies have a role to play in helping to address these questions. Societies are publishers of scholarship and should therefore be working to address the problem of peer review for digital scholarship in their own publications. Associations like the AHA and the MLA are also communities of scholars, and the power of the community can be harnessed to move this debate forward.

[SLIDE: GUIDELINES] In 2015 the AHA published guidelines to help departments and individual scholars work toward answering some of those questions. For the full set of recommendations you can go online and read the Guidelines, and I hope you will discuss

them in your departments, but I want to point out a few statements in these Guidelines that come back to the larger questions about what scholarship is and how we can make space for digital practice and publication in our disciplines, before returning to look at one more project that I think is instructive on these issues.

[SLIDE – GUIDELINES QUOTE]

“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.”

So what these guidelines clearly state is that where digital history contributes to that “documented and disciplined

conversation” it should be treated just like historical scholarship that is produced and published using more traditional methods. There is a central problem here, and that is the question of how we know whether a digital publication contributes to that conversation. Of course, peer review is the mechanism by which this happens. And very few digital project undergo the same kinds of peer review as more traditional outputs. This is a problem that we need to address, and which is being addressed in some quarters already.

[SLIDE – CRDH] The Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media recently announced an annual conference and accompanying publication that has as a central goal the creation of a mechanism for peer review of digital scholarship.

The *American Historical Review* is also starting to look at ways that digital scholarship can be peer reviewed and “published” by the journal, and other journals are also beginning to explore this landscape and experiment with the ways in which digital scholarship can be published.

Publishers are also starting to get involved in this process. Most notably, so far, Stanford University Press has a digital scholarship publishing program, and a number of other presses are

beginning to work in this area. Including the University of California, which has a book coming out in the open access Luminos series that takes advantage of the multimedia possibilities. Brown University has what it calls a “Digital Publishing Initiative,” and there are other projects that are working to build infrastructure for these types of interactive and web-based publications.

Many of these programs are currently funded by the Mellon Foundation, and so sustainability of the program, and scalability to the wider domain of humanities publishing beyond the period of grant funding is a significant issue, but the involvement of presses, libraries, and digital research centers, as well as scholarly societies are the means for embedding this type of work into our disciplines.

[slide 8]

And there’s no doubt that funding from the Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities has enabled scholars, and the institutions that house and support scholarship to push the boundaries. **[SLIDE – ENCHANTING THE DESERT]**

Last year, Stanford University Press published *Enchanting the Desert*, a work of cultural geography, which is billed as a “born-digital interactive monograph.” *Enchanting the Desert* explores in

great depth a set of images of the Grand Canyon. The set of landscape photographs taken by Henry Peabody between 1899 and 1930 and presented as a narrated slideshow that “helped produce a national vision of the Grand Canyon, a vision that recast the space of the Grand Canyon in a new light.”

The project is monographic in length and scope, comprised of a book-length amount of text. It links the photographs and text with tools to explore the geography of the Grand Canyon as depicted in the Peabody’s slideshow, including interactive maps and viewshed diagrams. Because it was published by a university press, Nicholas Bauch’s book went through peer review, and a robust editorial process. It has the approval of a respected university press, and this helps with some of the problems of how to evaluate digital scholarship that I mentioned earlier.

[SLIDE: FLY AROUND] Scholarship is a conversation. It is an exchange of ideas between scholars and other scholars, educators and students, and with audiences outside the academy. This exchange traditionally occurs in books and journals, but the means

we now have for creating knowledge and communicating ideas have proliferated since the advent of digital scholarship and publishing. Ultimately, the research methodologies and the media used should be those best suited to the historical questions. While digital tools and methods may be vital for some projects, traditional means of publication may be preferable for others. We should not privilege one type of container for ideas over others for any other reason than the service of scholarship. To move forward and continue to have relevance in a changing world and to continue to refine our understanding of historical change, we must embrace these new methodologies and thoroughly theorize their impact on humanistic inquiry.

Historians have traditionally carried on this conversation primarily by writing articles and books. But we now find ourselves living through a moment of cultural and social change impelled, at least in part, by technological change in how we communicate that appears to be at least as momentous as the invention of print. Our discipline solidified its sense of itself in the nineteenth century through print; we now need to adapt a new historical moment in which digital culture exists alongside print culture, by finding ways

of incorporating digital methods into the heart of our work. **[SLIDE**

- THANK YOU]