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A Call to Redefine Historical Scholarship in the Digital Turn

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A Call to Redefine Historical Scholarship in the Digital Turn

[Jason Heppler](#), [Douglas Seefeldt](#) and [Alex Galarza](#)

This is a collaboratively-written call for the American Historical Association to appoint a task force to survey the profession as to the place of digital historical scholarship in promotion and tenure and graduate student training and to recommend standards and guidelines for the profession to follow. This document is a product of many of the exciting changes discussed below. It began at a session at [THATCamp AHA 2012](#) that included graduate students, tenured and non-tenured faculty, and librarians. These participants and others continued their conversations at the physical conference and afterwards on the web. Additional signatures and edits in the Google Doc were solicited via Twitter, and through posts on [Jason's blog](#) and by [Alex on GradHacker](#). The letter was then submitted to the American Historical Association's Research Division on January 26, 2012. On June 2, 2012 the [AHA announced](#) the establishment of a Task Force on Digital Scholarship.

The addition of the term “digital” to the humanities signals an exciting turn spurred by both technological change and an expanded understanding of scholarship. The unprecedented number of sessions focusing on digital scholarship at the 126th Annual American Historical Association in Chicago indicates that historians are active participants in a digital revolution promoting interdisciplinary, open, and collaborative scholarship. Practitioners of digital history are producing excellent models of research, pedagogy, and public engagement. Some models unsettle our understanding of units of scholarship, such as the monograph, while others fall into the recognizable forms of journal publications and edited volumes. The encouragement and recognition of this work by peers has been important to fostering more innovation that will continue to change the field.

Digital tools are transforming the practice of history, yet junior scholars and graduate students are facing obstacles and risks to their professional advancement in using methods unrecognized as rigorous scholarly work. Their peers and evaluators are often unable or unwilling to address the scholarship on its merits. Opportunities to publish digital work, or to even have it reviewed are limited. Finally, promotion and tenure processes are largely built around 19th-century notions of historical scholarship that do not recognize or appropriately value much of this work. The disconnect between traditional evaluation and training and new digital methods means young scholars take on greater risks when dividing their limited time and attention on new methods that ultimately may not ever face scholarly evaluation on par with traditional scholarly production.

Six years ago the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) reflected: “We might expect younger colleagues to use new technologies with greater fluency and ease, but with more at stake, they will also be more risk-adverse. . . . Senior scholars now have both the opportunity and responsibility to take certain risks, first among which is to condone risk taking in their junior colleagues and their graduate students, making sure that such endeavors are appropriately rewarded.”^[1] Historians have responded to these difficulties by challenging promotion and tenure processes within their own institutions, developing graduate programs that train scholars in digital practices, and by experimenting with new models of peer-review in publishing.

These early adopters face difficulties in having their digital scholarship properly assessed and valued for promotion and tenure. The faculty of UCLA’s Digital Humanities program have noted difficulties stemming from the fact that digital projects may not look like traditional academic scholarship. They stress that “new knowledge is not just new content but also new ways of organizing, classifying, and interacting with content. This means that a major part of the intellectual contribution of a digital project is the design of the interface, the database, and the code, all of which govern the form of the content.”^[2] Therein lies the conundrum: the “digital turn” in the humanities is opening up exciting opportunities for complex digital scholarship, graduate programs are beginning to instruct students in the theories and methods of digital history, and institutions are hiring tenure-line faculty to pursue this new genre of scholarly communication but a concomitant evolution of the customs and standards of valuing and assessing this new model of scholarship has not developed apace. Or, as the UCLA digital humanities scholars contend, “digital scholars are not only in the position of doing original research but also of inventing new scholarly platforms after 500+ years of print so fully naturalized the ‘look’ of knowledge that it may be difficult for reviewers to understand these new forms of documentation and intellectual effort that goes into developing them.” “This,” they say, “is the the dual burden — and the dual opportunity — for creativity in the digital domain.”^[3]

Nearly two decades ago, an AHA ad hoc committee on redefining historical scholarship noted: “The AHA defines the history profession in broad, encompassing terms, but is that definition meaningful as long as only certain kinds of work are valued and deemed scholarly within our discipline?”^[4] We are asking the American Historical Association to again take up this question, with the ACLS’s observation in mind, and begin paving the way for evaluating digital methods and training. It is essential that the AHA demonstrate leadership to encourage these solutions and to provide guidelines for a widespread institutional definition of what counts as scholarly work in the profession. An ad hoc committee would be instrumental to help achieve the following:

- Gather and assess data on the state of digital scholarship in the profession, such as a survey of digital humanities centers that engage in historical research, institutions that teach digital history curriculum, and a general survey of department members including chairs, directors of graduate study, faculty, and graduate students.
- Evaluate the existing tenure and promotion practices of departments and their ability to recognize and fairly evaluate digital scholarship.
- Encourage departments to evaluate how they are training graduate students to practice or evaluate digital scholarship as a part of their regular graduate program.
- Issue guidelines for the evaluation of digital scholarship similar to the Modern Language Association’s 2007 “Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion.”^[5]

The merits of digital scholarship in the historical profession demand that we again ask what counts.

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Additional Resources

The American Association for History & Computing, “[Guidelines for Evaluating Digital Media Activities in Tenure, Review, and Promotion](#).” (2006)

American Historical Association, “[Report of the American Historical Association Ad Hoc Committee on Redefining Scholarly Work](#).” (1993)

Modern Language Association, [Report of the Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion](#). (2007)

National Council on Public History, “[Tenure, Promotion, and the Engaged Academic Historian](#)” (PDF) Whitepaper. (2010)

University of Nebraska Center for Digital Research in the Humanities (CDRH) “[Guidelines on Evaluating Digital Scholarship](#).”

Todd Presner, “[How to Evaluate Digital Scholarship](#).” (September 2011)

[1] “[Our Cultural Commonwealth](#),” report by the ACLS Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 29 July 2006. ↗

[2] Todd Presner, “[How to Evaluate Digital Scholarship](#),” UCLA’s Digital Humanities program (September 2011). ↗

[3] Presner ↗

[4] “[Redefining Historical Scholarship: Report of the American Historical Association Ad Hoc Committee on Redefining Scholarly Work](#),” December 1993. ↗

[5] “[Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion](#),” *Profession* (2007). ↗

About Jason Heppler, Douglas Seefeldt, and Alex Galarza



Jason A. Heppler is the Academic Technology Specialist in the Department of History at Stanford University and a Ph.D. candidate in History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His dissertation research focuses on urban history in the North American West during the Cold War, where he examines how urban change shaped political and social identities where the digital economy came to exert influence on a place. He is the author of *The Rubyist Historian* (2011), an electronic book on Ruby programming for humanities researchers, and a contributor to *The Plains Political Tradition* (2011). Prior to joining Stanford, he served as the project manager for the William F. Cody Archive at the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities at UNL.

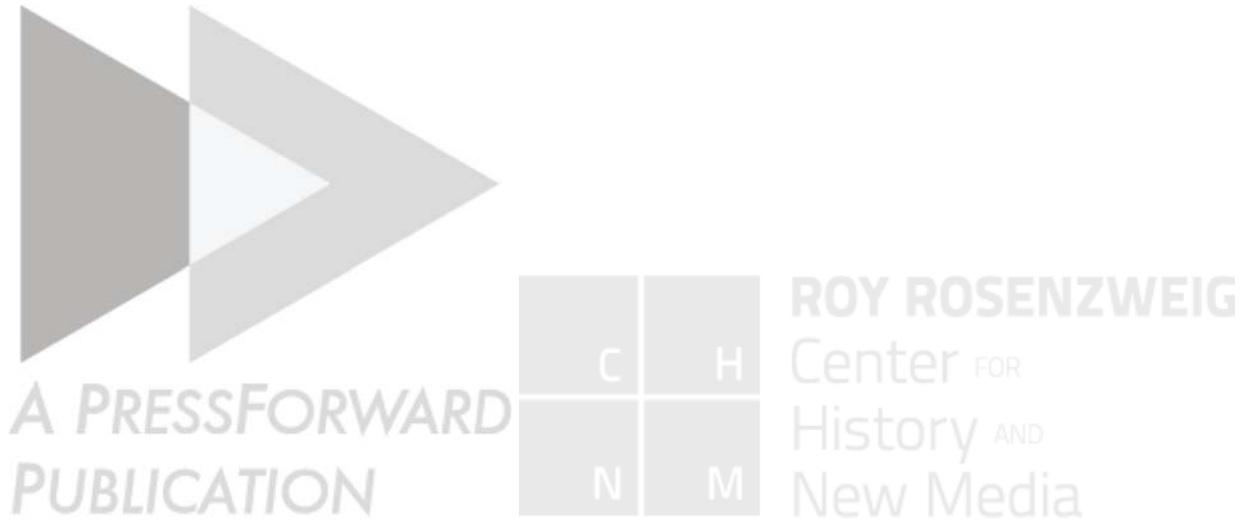


Douglas Seefeldt is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Emerging Media Fellow at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana where he pursues teaching and research interests in Western history, history and memory, and digital history. He took a B.A. from Hampshire College, an M.A. from the University of Oregon, and a Ph.D. from Arizona State University. Doug spent three years at the University of Virginia as a Woodrow Wilson Academic Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities where he worked at the Virginia Center for Digital History and served as Director of UVa's Lewis & Clark Bicentennial Project. He was a faculty member in the Department of History and faculty Fellow at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where he developed several digital history projects including *Envisaging the West: Thomas Jefferson and Roots of Lewis and Clark*; *Horrible Massacre of Emigrants!!: The Mountain Meadows Massacre in Public Discourse*; and *Buffalo Bill's Great Plains*. Doug is Senior Digital Editor for the Papers of William F. Cody, and he co-directs, with Katherine Walter, the William F. Cody Archive. He also co-edits, along with William G. Thomas, the Digital History

Project, a website that serves as a clearinghouse for discussions of digital history theory and practice and publishes reviews of tools and projects.



Alex is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at Michigan State University whose research examines the urban history of Buenos Aires through soccer clubs. Alex will be in Buenos Aires during 2013 on a Fulbright. He is the founder of the Football Scholars Forum, an academic book club that meets monthly over the internet to discuss books on soccer. He is also the co-editor of gradhacker.org, a blog appearing on InsideHigherEd.com for graduate students, by graduate students.



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