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Writing History in the Digital Age

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Conclusions

What We Learned from Writing History in the Digital Age

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What have we learned from creating this collective work of scholarship on the web? To what extent are new technologies transforming the work of historians and the ways in which we interpret the past and communicate our ideas with others? Does the so-called digital turn mark anything truly different about the trajectory of historical writing? What lessons have we learned about open peer review and open-access publishing? In this conclusion, we reflect on both the essays in this volume and our experiences in publishing them, to address these and other questions that arose during the yearlong process of developing the concept, modifying the existing technology, and cultivating a community of writers and readers who made it all happen. Since an essential step was to make the “invisible” work of writing and reviewing more public, the book’s coeditors (Jack and Kristen) invited two of the most thoughtfully engaged participants in the fall 2011 open peer review (Charlotte and Timothy) to collaborate in authoring these reflections.¹ Here, by responding to these key questions, we share what we have learned from *Writing History in the Digital Age*.

Has Digital Technology Transformed Historical Writing, and If So, How?

Much of this volume emphasizes change. Two decades of the web have expanded the range of creators of historical works, the types of products

generated, and the processes of distribution and evaluation, all of which stand out because they diverge from established practices in our profession. Yet we were surprised to discover the degree of continuity in the content of historical writing. The best of digitally inspired scholarship integrates technology into the art of composing works that feature what many consider the finest qualities in our field: a compelling narrative that unravels the past, supported by insightful argument and persuasive evidence.

Several contributors to this volume vividly describe how digital tools enabled them to uncover richer interpretations of source materials than they otherwise would have discovered. Ansley Erickson explains how a simple relational database not only managed her archival notes but allowed her to rethink how she categorized knowledge during her writing process. Stephen Robertson recounts how digitally mapping everyday life in Harlem pinpointed areas of racial conflict and negotiation that had previously gone unnoticed. Robert Wolff explores how the collectively authored *Wikipedia* platform permits us to peel back the layers of “popular memory” and “professional history” behind each entry, revealing more about contested meanings of the past than do traditional forms of scholarship. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin describe how they learned to combine primary documents and interpretation on the web to create richer scholarship and expand the scope of women’s history. Even Fred Gibbs and Trevor Owens, whose essay pointedly calls for historians to write with greater methodological transparency about our use of data, favor “de-emphasizing narrative,” though they do not abandon it. Today’s digital media revolution reminds us, argues Stefan Tanaka, that our present-day conceptions of historical writing did not arise until the late eighteenth century, when people began chronicling the past in a linear structure. Taken together, these digitally inspired essays embrace historians’ long-standing commitment to narrative, argument, and evidence.

But several contributors also wrestle with changes brought on by the “democratization of history” on the web and our current version of the question, who creates the past?² In 1931, Carl Becker, president of the American Historical Association, declared “everyman his own historian,” and eight decades later, every woman, man, and child (with Internet access) can view source materials and publish their own interpretations, thereby engaging in work that had previously had been the domain of professional historians.³ Despite her own misgivings about the web-driven black Confederate myth, Leslie Madsen-Brooks argues that crowdsourcing creates key opportunities for historians to engage with a public that clearly cares about the meaning of the past, and Amanda Sikarskie also emphasizes the

role of “citizen scholars” in the “co-creation of content rather than consumption of content.” Similarly, essays from history educators Thomas Harbison and Luke Waltzer and also Adrea Lawrence demonstrate how technology can deepen critical thinking and writing about the past in their classrooms. Their perspective is shared by Oscar Rosales Castañeda, who, with other student-activists, digitized civil rights source materials and engaged in the very public act of interpreting their significance on the web.

Yet “the Internet is not an inherently even playing field; to digitize is not to democratize,” as Shawn Graham, Guy Massie, and Nadine Feuerherm remind us. Martha Saxton describes how her class collided with today’s digital embodiment of Becker’s “everyman”—*Wikipedia* and its “neutral point of view” policy—as their efforts to integrate perspectives from women’s history were occasionally moved elsewhere or erased. Furthermore, in Graham’s innovative “Wikiblitz” classroom activity, he reports “push back from an unexpected quarter” of his first-year seminar—declared history majors—who “already had quite clear ideas about authority, authorship, and intellectual property, ideas that fit in quite well with established ways of writing history.” Technology did not create these debates over who “owns” the past, but it does make it harder for professional historians to ignore them.

Another theme across the essays demarcates the lines of debate regarding the products of digital history, particularly how we recognize arguments within these newer types of historical writing. Amanda Seligman illustrates how she teaches her students to identify arguments embedded within “factual” encyclopedia entries, both print and online. John Theibault contends that data visualizations “necessarily have a rhetorical dimension” and that historians must “align the rhetoric” to better communicate their interpretation of maps and charts to the viewer. By contrast, Sherman Dorn’s survey of the field challenges the profession to use “the best of digital history work to redraw the discipline’s boundaries,” by breaking away from long-form argument in journal articles and books as the defining standard of historical scholarship. Together, these essays show how seriously historians debate the role of argument, even when we disagree over how much we should value it.

A fourth set of essays speak directly to the process of creating, sharing, and assessing historical writing in the digital age, with collaboration as a recurring theme. Natalia Mehlman Petrzela and Sarah Manekin narrate their personal accountability partnership within a broader analysis of dissertation advice guides and self-help literature. Similarly, the research and design team behind *Pox and the City* richly describe their collective think-

ing on writing the history of medicine as a computer game, particularly on issues of historical content, player characters, and third-person perspective. As readers, we benefit when authors' thoughtful disagreements emerge more clearly through collaborative writing: together, Jonathan Jarrett and Alex Cummings attempt to predict the future of blogging in historical writing, but one contends that "blogging will only serve as a means of *generating* scholarship when peer review ceases to *validate*" it, while the other anticipates that "this informal zone of writing, sharing, and discussion can complement, rather than supplant, the main streams of scholarly discourse and publication." Nevertheless, both agree that the Internet is interrupting the traditional academic practice of "filter-then-publish," thereby raising the potential for the practice of "publish-then-filter," as we also discussed in our introduction.

Writing about history in our digital age has its share of internal debates, much like the broader field of the digital humanities.⁴ But Kathleen Fitzpatrick persuades us that the most challenging barriers to the transformation of scholarly communication are not technological but, instead, "social, intellectual, and institutional."⁵ The academy has been ambivalent about the Internet, observes Dan Cohen, and "this resistance has less to do with the *tools* of the web and more to do with the web's *culture*," specifically its degree of openness that makes many scholars suspicious.⁶ By nature, historians are a skeptical breed. Yet by pulling the curtain aside and making the process of writing, reviewing, and publishing history more visible, we hope that this volume of essays—and the debates expressed within it—will help make the case that the digital age offers a valuable opportunity for the profession to reexamine our established practices and realign them with our scholarly values. The extent to which this reexamination puts us on virgin soil as a profession is another matter, as Timothy Burke explains next.

Is the "Digital Turn" Truly New? (by Timothy Burke)

Some of the contributors to *Writing History in the Digital Age* surrender, to varying degrees, to the temptation to characterize the digitization of historical inquiry as a novel insurgency against a recumbent scholarly establishment. Many contributors emphasize the capacity of digital media to create novel forms of dialogic interaction between publics and scholars, to reroute the circulation of historical expertise, and to erode some of the privileged authority that the scholarly guild confers on itself. But many of these concerns are not new or entirely novel to digital media or information technology. I suggest, instead, that digitization offers a powerful new

means to a long-articulated end and an investigative tool for the continued study of the wider circulations of historical representation.

By way of illustration, let me mention three specifically relevant bodies of scholarly writing that deserve to be in richer dialogue with advocacy for new modes of digital practice. The first is a well-established and wide-ranging body of work by historians, archaeologists, curators, archivists, and educators specifically concerned with controversies and practical problems in memorialization, museum design, and public history. Long-running discussions of public struggles such as those around the *Enola Gay* exhibit at the Smithsonian⁷ or the problems intrinsic to “living history” and reenactment practices, for example, dovetail beautifully into the concerns of the contributors to *Writing History in the Digital Age*.

A second scholarly literature to consider in relation to advocacy of digital practice stands at the intersection between history and anthropology and is most visibly manifest in a series of international meetings and discussions in the late 1970s and 1980s between social historians and cultural anthropologists. The key takeaway in this older moment of historiographical ferment for “history in a digital age” is that it catalyzed, for many historians, a desire to make the relationship between historical sources and scholarly knowledge vastly more porous and unsettled. This turn went beyond conventional “history from below” to much more destabilizing projects. The first of these involved a dramatic expansion of what counted as valid historical evidence, often in pointed rebuke of existing scholarship. Raphael Samuel’s polemical attack on his British colleagues for refusing to take on popular culture and textual ephemera as source material is an example, as is Luise White’s appraisal of rumor and gossip as evidence for writing the history of colonial Africa.⁸ The second move was the incorporation of testimony and other forms of evidence or bricolage within scholarly work in a manner designed to create epistemological parity between sources and scholars, as in Shula Marks’s *Not Either an Experimental Doll* or Carlo Ginzberg’s *The Cheese and the Worms*.⁹

Finally, a third literature, which grew out of this dialogue between history and anthropology, raised still more comprehensive questions about the relationship between scholarly historians and historically engaged publics and, in so doing, reimagined the historical guild as a mere subset of a much bigger “production of history.” In works like Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past*, David William Cohen’s *The Combing of History*, or Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land*, academic history is resituated as a limited, if valued, enterprise, one part of a vaster terrain comprised of public memory, lived experience of individuals and communities, amateur and specialist

work outside of the academic world, diverse cultural imaginations and performances of the past, and much else.¹⁰ Trouillot, Cohen, and others did not call on historians to master or incorporate this wider domain, nor did they ask historians to submit to it. They did, however, imagine that there might be far more generative or creative ways for scholarly historians to collaborate or converse with wider publics and circumstances. This last literature in particular very directly leads into the aspiration of some contributors to this volume that “history in the digital age” will underscore the limitations of scholarly practices and will permit radically new forms of relationship between academic historians and various sites of historical knowledge and production outside of the academy.

How Did You Encourage Public Discussion on a Book in Progress?

At present, the dominant work culture for historians is to produce single-author scholarship, often in isolation from others, and typically not revealed until final publication. We intentionally drew on web technology to interrupt this norm, by crafting a digital platform to make the stages of idea formation and peer review more public for our scholarly work. We proposed that constructing an edited volume of essays on the open web would make our writing more meaningful to others, more responsive to online commentary, and, as a whole, more intellectually coherent.

As we launched the site in spring 2011, our greatest fear was organizing a forum where no one showed up. So the coeditors timed our key events to coincide with the U.S. academic calendar, by holding our discussion of essay ideas immediately before the summer break and conducting our open peer review during the middle of the fall semester. Our low-budget communications strategy relied on varied forms of communication to reach different types of audiences. We sent over 100 personalized e-mail invitations to prospective contributors whom we already knew or identified to be working in the field of digital history. We connected with others through digital announcements (such as the H-Net networks) and blogs (such as a *ProfHacker* guest essay). We presented the work in progress at digital humanities gatherings, such as THATCamp (The Humanities and Technology Camp) Prime 2011 and HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory) 2011. But the most important lesson we learned was the power of a critical mass of contributors with their own social media connections. When we tweeted or blogged about new essay ideas on our edited volume, this information cascaded as several authors

and commenters recirculated it on their Twitter, Facebook, and WordPress accounts. A typical solo-authored monograph would not have generated the same response.

With each phase of the project, we expanded the website for *Writing History in the Digital Age* to guide visitors into lively channels of discussion and also to document the evolution of our writing. During the initial “call for ideas” phase in May–June 2011, we invited readers to generate and respond to potential themes for the volume, and 73 participants posted 261 comments, which collectively generated over 60 paragraph-length topics. By late August 2011, we received 28 fully drafted essays from individual authors and coauthors, which we converted into WordPress posts. We then instructed our contributors on how to enhance them with digital media and web links. When combined with our introductory essay, the fall 2011 volume totaled over 120,000 words, far above the 90,000 permitted in our advance book contract with the University of Michigan Press. We publicly announced the open peer review, which ran from October through November 2011 and drew 71 participants who wrote 942 comments, the majority of them on substantive issues. The coeditors met in December 2011 to select 20 out of 28 essays (about 70 percent) to be revised and resubmitted to the press as the full manuscript. Newer versions of essays were posted online in spring 2012, with links to prior drafts and copyediting for the print version to be submitted.

The coeditors’ editorial and intellectual property policy deliberately required essay contributors and commenters to use their full names and agree to our Creative Commons licensing. The combined objectives were to reward quality ideas by attribution, circulate them freely and widely, and maintain civil discourse online. Although we initially “primed the pump” to guarantee some comments at the spring 2011 launch, the flow ran nearly continuously during the fall of 2011, with minimal guidance from us.

Unlike a print-only text, our web-book format allows editors to track some general characteristics of the audience, how they arrived at the site, and which portions of the text generated the greatest interest. Based on anonymous Google Analytics data, over 8,500 unique visitors came to *Writing History in the Digital Age* during its developmental period from May 2011 through mid-January 2012. The number continues to rise as of this writing. Most of these web visits were brief. Only 1,000 unique visitors spent at least five minutes viewing our site, and of those, only 122 spent more than one hour on the site, which is comparable to the total number of individuals who have posted comments during all stages of the web-book.

Put into perspective, our user statistics are relatively small when compared to digital history websites, but they are larger than we anticipated for a volume of academic essays that have not yet been officially “published.”

To what extent does this readership represent “the public” at large? We suspect that most readers who spent significant time on our 120,000-word site were other academics, but we can only infer this indirectly. The most popular sources of web traffic for engaged readers (who spent at least five minutes on the site) were direct links, most likely from an e-mailed announcement (32 percent), search engine keywords (28 percent), Twitter links (8 percent), and H-Net announcements (4 percent), followed by a range of institutional and individual blogs on history, writing, and digital publishing (totaling 24 percent). Some blog-driven web traffic came from sources familiar to us, while there were other sources we did not expect, such as two U.S. Civil War public history blogs that pointed directly to an essay of particular interest to their readers. Our English-language site engaged readers from the Western Hemisphere: most came from North America (72 percent), Western Europe (12 percent), and Northern Europe (7 percent), the home bases of the coeditors and most contributors. But we were pleasantly surprised to read that a Spanish historian translated several paragraphs from the introduction to share on a blog, as permitted under our Creative Commons license.¹¹

What Types of Comments Were Posted, and by Whom, during the Open Review?

Readers of the volume had almost as much to say as the authors who wrote it. Taken together, the 942 open-review comments yielded 83,510 words of text (the equivalent of 148 single-spaced pages), or about three-fourths of the 120,000 words in the fall 2011 essays combined. Tracing the source of these comments reveals that the open-review process did not rely solely on the four expert reviewers designated by the University of Michigan Press. Of the 71 individuals who posted open-review comments, the majority were general readers (43 percent) and other contributors to the volume (41 percent), followed by the appointed reviewers (14 percent) and the book’s coeditors (2 percent). We identified 10 individuals who posted 20 or more comments each: 6 were authors, 2 were expert reviewers, and 2 were general readers (including one who posted 244 comments, one-quarter of the grand total). One of the expert reviewers also required students in his graduate class on digital humanities to post a comment on the site, which boosted input from general readers. The median essay generated 31 com-



Fig. 10. Screenshot of text and commentary from the fall 2011 web-book version of *Writing History in the Digital Age*

ments, though the range varied widely from a low of 6 to a high of 66. When authors responded to their readers' comments, as they did in 23 out of 28 essays, it tended to generate more feedback from others. The CommentPress plug-in on our WordPress site gave readers the option of posting their remarks at three different levels of the text: general comments on the book (5 percent of the total), comments on a whole essay page (17 percent), and paragraph-level comments (78 percent). At least five essays contained paragraphs that generated eight to nine comments, signaling specific passages of the text that sparked vibrant discussion. The site allowed readers to browse comments along the margin of each essay or to view all comments by the individuals who wrote them (see fig. 10).¹²

What did these comments look like? When sorting all open-review comments by category, we found that 79 percent were substantive remarks on essays, in contrast to copyediting suggestions or brief acknowledgments to thank others for their feedback. Among the substantive comments, many were constructive or reflective, several probed more deeply with insightful questions, and a few were very critical or downright defensive. A typical constructive exchange between authors and readers focused on certain

portions of the writing that should be further developed. For example, in response to Adrea Lawrence's essay "Learning How to Write Traditional and Digital History," Cheryl Greenberg posted this comment on paragraph 19:

Here is an example of what I'd like to hear more about. The questions about interpretation, the impact of Wikipedia-like sources for historical narrative and analysis, are central issues to historians hoping to engage more productively with digital and on-line materials. I'd like to hear the students'—and your—reflections on what they concluded after this Wikipedia experience.

Two weeks later, Adrea Lawrence replied,

Enthusiastic ambivalence is how I would characterize my students' attitude about Wikipedia as a viable and reliable source. All of my students commented on how much they appreciated the transparency of the editing and feedback process on Wikipedia. Two of them, in fact, deliberately made their digital histories commentable in the hope that other scholars would read their work and offer feedback. This type of transparency made other students uncomfortable in spite of their regard for Wikipedia editors' transparency. Too, students felt that it was difficult to identify and write for a particular audience on Wikipedia and in their digital history projects. What does a "general audience" look like, and what do they already know? This seemed to be one of the biggest initial issues for students, but it was one that they were able to work through after they began writing on Wikipedia and receiving feedback from other editors.

The next day, Cheryl Greenberg replied by affirming what she found interesting in the author's response and encouraging her to incorporate these insights into a revised version of the article.¹³

Other substantive exchanges occurred when readers disagreed about the significance of an author's main point or underlying assumptions. In response to the fall 2011 version of John Theibault's essay "Visualizations and Historical Arguments," commenters expressed a range of opinions. One contributor, Amanda Seligman, began by stating, "This article is at its strongest—and invaluable—in its discussion of mapping." But another contributor, Fred Gibbs, disagreed.

Actually, I would say the opposite. Historians are probably as [if not more] comfortable with maps than other complex (and especially mul-

tivariate) visualization. It's the scatter plots and tree diagrams and representations of that nature that can be downright frightening to those who aren't familiar with them.

A third point of view came from Kathryn Tomasek.

Quite a dense essay. I've clearly been reading too many student papers because I kept looking for a thesis, as some of my comments show. I do see the thread of argument: historians have supplemented their work with illustrations; digital visualizations are different, both from illustrations and from the displays of data of the cliometricians. As a reader, I need some help, though.¹⁴

Even some copyediting comments provoked strong differences of opinion. In Amanda Sikarskie's essay "Citizen Scholars: Facebook and the Co-creation of Knowledge," reader Jeremy McGinniss suggested two wording corrections to paragraph 12, which prompted Jonathan Jarrett to reply, "I don't agree with either of those corrections! . . . I submit that the sentence is correct as it stands."¹⁵ We also found that some commenters (including one of the coeditors) struggled with writing feedback that was critical in content yet civil in tone. This problem is not specific to scholarly discourse on the web, as a review of heated exchanges in the "Letters to the Editor" sections of leading historical journals in past decades will attest. But our collective sense of "Internet etiquette" is still evolving and will continue to do so with the transparency of open peer review, where all can learn from reading the substantive commenting styles of others.

What motivated these commenters to voluntarily contribute their time and energy to the volume? Some may have wished to share a personal experience or a scholarly insight or to start up a connection to the field of digital history. Others may have sought public recognition for generating thoughtful feedback, as our policy that comments must be accompanied by full name encouraged. Some authors may have acted in self-interest, on the grounds that constructively raising the quality of the whole volume could also boost the status of their individual essays. Regardless of their particular motivation, all commenters engaged in historical writing as a collaborative creative process, rather than an isolated one. Yet this online sense of community did not appear instantaneously. During the two-month period, some readers gradually shifted from distant observers to highly engaged contributors. Charlotte Rochez recounts next how the process transformed her into one of the most prolific commenters on the volume, submitting over 11,000 words in feedback (or the equivalent of two entire essays).

How Did Open Review Transform Some Readers into Commenters? (by Charlotte Rochez)

When I first learned of *Writing History in the Digital Age*, I explored the website and read a few of the early articles; I recognized it as an exciting endeavor, and it sparked my thoughts, as well as a blog post, regarding how modern technology influenced my own writing processes. In summer 2011, a call was opened for article submission, and I suggested a paper focusing on the Internet and oral history. However, while grappling with the finishing touches, I realized that I did not wish to post it online in this way; I questioned possibilities of plagiarism and the notion of making criticism public and was uncertain about the use of digital, online citations. Moreover, I wondered whether, in the event that a piece was not accepted for final publication in this volume, it would be eligible for publication elsewhere, having already been posted online for public review. Through reading and reviewing the essays, I learned that this reluctance and wariness toward online publishing is shared by many students and by some more-experienced academics too.

Engagement in the open-review process helped me to address some of these concerns and altered my attitudes toward public online review. At first, I had preferred to make coded notes in a private Word document, but about halfway through the book, I felt inclined to post online. My misgivings were alleviated when authors responded positively to my comments, entering into a dialogue where further ideas, information, and links were shared. As I read Robert Wolff's claim that *Wikipedia* offered an opportunity "to peer behind the curtain and, if interested, take a place at the controls," it resonated with my experience in the open-review process, which presented me an unusual prospect as a student, something of a public apprenticeship in reviewing and editing.¹⁶

Through this apprenticeship, I advanced my understanding of how the processes of academic writing, editing, and publishing could better draw on conversation, community, and collaboration. The commenting during the open review served as a platform for public academic conversation, demonstrating how dialogic, discursive aspects of history could be electronically written in the digital age. In this way, the volume blurred the boundaries between a conference and a book. This increased the authors' ability to access and engage with some of the wider dialogues following from or contextualizing their initial essays and offered them the chance to incorporate aspects from these dialogues into their work before the more official publication. In this sense, the volume's open-review process showed

how the digital age may foster a trend away from competition and toward collaboration in book publishing. Despite this, certain aspects of the volume's wider publication process suggested that we have yet to fully explore the collaborative potentials afforded by the web; for example, at least initially, few contributors took advantage of the coauthoring opportunities presented by the online volume. Perhaps this indicates that we are still coming to recognize and take practical advantage of such new opportunities and to explore their potential intellectual and professional benefits and risks.¹⁷

Did the Benefits of Publishing on the Web, with Open Peer Review, Outweigh Its Risks?

Without a doubt, publishing a book in its developmental stages on the web and opening it up to public criticism places its contributors in a precarious position. Some commenters on the volume wisely raised concerns about its potential downsides. Might unfiltered comments on an Internet forum, where poorly chosen words have consequences beyond their intended meaning, risk public humiliation for authors? Conversely, would an open-review process on the web—with full names of evaluators disclosed—pressure evaluators to be too nice, therefore discouraging opportunities for truly candid criticism?¹⁸ As exemplified by the reflections of Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Katherine Rowe on their experience with *Shakespeare Quarterly*, even some advocates of open peer review have questioned whether the process inhibits untenured scholars from publicly critiquing ideas advanced by senior names in the field.¹⁹

Indeed, no review process is perfect, but we agree with the need for alternatives to the traditional blind system of peer review.²⁰ One problem is that in the age of Google, peer review has effectively reverted from double- to single-blind, because today's reviewers can usually decipher the author's identity, if desired, by searching online conference programs and departmental web pages. But the larger problem is that traditional peer review is invisible labor with very few institutional rewards. Because one's name does not appear on traditionally reviewed material, there is no public recognition for the quality of the work done. By contrast, our open-review experiment means that readers can identify the source of every comment, whether constructive or not. With this, we seek to create richer incentives for developmental editing, a commodity highly prized among authors (particularly in the time-starved academic economy), because it requires others to attend to one's writing with careful reading and thoughtful feed-

back. Historians and other humanists crave this type of feedback because so much of our scholarly value is based on our ability to clearly express our ideas in writing. Some historians contend that book and journal editors still play this role, but others argue that drastic changes in the academic publishing industry have sharply curtailed it.²¹

As Timothy has suggested elsewhere, if we lack sufficient cash to pay for developmental editing, we should consider an alternate form of currency widely recognized in the scholarly world: our reputation capital.²² In our name-disclosed peer review, the value of our reputations rises or falls based on readers' and authors' perceptions of the quality of our feedback. Did the commenter make a fair-minded criticism of an essay, pose a deep question that calls attention to an unstated assumption, suggest an alternate way to frame the argument, recommend an overlooked source, or push aside the fluff? Instead of masking commenters' identities, open peer review flips the traditional model by creating a powerful incentive for scholars to invest time and energy in evaluating other people's writing, as the comments themselves become part of the scholarship.

Given the experimental nature of open peer review, the coeditors of this collaboration installed reasonable safeguards to protect our scholarly values of civil discourse and intellectual criticism. Our policy on editorial and intellectual property granted contributors the right to remove their essay from discussion at any point in the process (none did so) and clarified our right as coeditors to remove inappropriate language from the comments (which was neither requested nor necessary for this volume). Comments appeared as they were posted on our site, filtered only by our spam guard, with an occasional reminder to individuals to use their full name, as well as some typographical corrections by request from a writer or with a writer's permission. As coeditors, our most serious intervention was to redirect one heated exchange to the appropriate section of the volume and to invite a contributor to elaborate on the substance (rather than the style) of a specific comment. Our invitations to revise and resubmit essays were posted as public comments, but we informed authors by private e-mail when we decided not to advance an essay to the final manuscript.

We also made sure that the expert reviewers could freely speak their minds. Prior to the open-review period, we nominated 10 expert reviewers to the University of Michigan Press, which selected 4 of them and offered each its standard compensation of \$200. Each expert received instructions that explained the mechanics of open peer review and its objective of encouraging all readers to participate in the evaluation process. But the letter also gave them the option, if desired, to send additional comments in

a confidential e-mail directly to the editor in chief at the press, who would share them with the coeditors as anonymous comments. (To our knowledge, none of the expert reviewers chose this option.) Furthermore, when launching the open peer review, we intentionally did not announce the names of the expert reviewers, and none overtly revealed his or her identity during the two-month process, though one did at the end. In practice, this meant that most authors could not easily distinguish between comments from “official” reviewers and comments from general readers. After the review period, we informally polled several essay contributors about the process. Some correctly guessed the experts’ identities based on their background, tone, or quantity of comments. Some correctly guessed only one or two and mistakenly assumed that other active commenters were the designated experts. Some reportedly neither attempted to guess nor cared who was who. While we have no definitive way of knowing if we succeeded, we strove for a meritocratic review process where the quality of the comment drove the status of the commenter, not vice versa.

Without a doubt, publishing this volume in stages on the public web enriched its intellectual coherence and scope beyond what the same set of authors would have produced using traditional practices. During the initial phase, when prospective contributors posted and discussed over 60 essay topics, the online forum led many to clarify, refocus, or abandon their ideas as better ones emerged. Moreover, the open peer review of full drafts demonstrated how crowdsourcing can improve our writing, as general readers and other authors posted valuable comments that never would have arisen if we had relied solely on traditional blind review with appointed experts. In their revised essays, several authors credited insights from noncommissioned commenters who they had never met in person.

Whereas a traditional press would rely primarily on comments written by its appointed experts to evaluate this volume, the “wisdom of the crowd” played an equal—or greater—role in shaping our thinking as coeditors. Several comments persuaded us that a particular paragraph or entire essay deserved more (or less) merit than we originally believed. Furthermore, general readers’ comments demonstrated the degree of engagement with the writing by our intended audience, at least more clearly than any other means currently available to us. Yet, although we tracked the numbers and types of comments posted on each essay, our editorial decisions were not driven by popularity contests or computerized algorithms. Instead, our judgment was more traditional. We evaluated essays on how insightfully they responded to the guiding questions of our volume and on the extent to which authors demonstrated capability and willingness to incorporate

rich ideas from the online developmental editing stage into their final revisions. Interestingly, some essays with relatively high numbers of comments were not invited to advance to the final round, while one essay with the lowest number was selected. Furthermore, some contributors anecdotally reported feeling more motivated to share their best work because their writing—at the stages of both preliminary idea and full draft—was publicly visible to all. We fully understand that this experimental format may not fit everyone and that individual perceptions of the process are linked to publication outcomes. But when framing it as an alternative to scholarship as usual, we agree with the assessment of contributor Shawn Graham: “The risk is worth the reward: . . . digital history takes place in a community, and this open peer review process represents a way of writing & crafting history in one step.”²³

What Is Next for Scholarly Publishing?

The Internet has changed the relationship between writers and readers, presses and libraries. With the click of a few buttons, scholars are sharing our writing online and commenting substantively on the words of others, which calls into question what we mean by the terms *publishing* and *peer review*. In response, all of the parties in academic book publishing need to rethink our relationships and financial arrangements with one another.

- *Authors*: We urge historians and other humanists to write more collaborative works or at least to coordinate individual works on related topics, treating writing similar to our customary task of creating coherent conference panels where contributors engage with one another. Furthermore, authors in the digital age should take on a larger role in preparing and formatting our writing for the web, as we required contributors to do for the online version of this volume. Both steps not only will reduce costs and speed up time to publication but will also serve our broader interest of creating more intellectually coherent works with richer communities of readers.
- *Readers and reviewers*: Peer review will always be the defining stage in the scholarly communication process. As illustrated by this volume, we recommend open-review processes that solicit feedback from designated experts and general readers on the public web, to raise the visibility of our highly valued labor of developmental editing and to fully credit it in stages of the work in progress. This pooling

together of established experts and rising newcomers, insiders and outsiders to the field, both legitimizes and strengthens our scholarly work.

- *Publishers and publishing services*: Academic book authors still require publishing services, but perhaps not as we have traditionally organized them. We have three primary needs: digital platforms to host and archive our writing, copyediting and technical assistance to meet production standards, and, most important, an impartial arbitrator of the open-review process to communicate with an editorial board on whether a work deserves its institutional stamp of approval. All three could be provided by a conventional publisher, a scholarly society, or an academic library that is funded to offer publishing services, as demonstrated by the University of Michigan. Whether or not these services can be financially sustainable under an open-access publishing model remains to be seen, and we will continue to closely watch other experiments.
- *Libraries and repositories*: If historians and scholars in other disciplines commit to open-access publishing in alignment with our scholarly values, the accumulated cost savings from library purchasing budgets potentially could be shifted to support their expanded role in publishing services. To be clear, this shift would not be instantaneous, and higher labor costs may still outweigh the projected budget savings. But a genuine cost-benefit analysis also needs to include the fiscal consequences of the status quo, where scholars are producing knowledge that fewer institutions can afford to provide to its intended audiences.

Writing History in the Digital Age has aspired to be a different type of book in at least three ways: it is born digital, open peer reviewed, and distributed by an open-access publisher. We believe that this model has enabled us to produce a more intellectually coherent and well-crafted volume than would have been possible with traditional means. Whether we have presented a thoughtful set of essays on how technology has transformed historical writing is to be decided by the readers. If this experiment has succeeded, we give credit to the community of contributors and commenters who decided against simply doing scholarship as usual. Given the growing fiscal crisis in academic publishing, we need more experiments to better understand which models might work, which ones will fail, and why. Accepting the status quo is not a fiscally sustainable option. If we truly

believe in creating knowledge to be shared and engaged by others, it is our responsibility to realign our publishing practices to be more consistent with our scholarly values.

Notes

1. Granting the honor of writing the “last words” this way, rather than automatically turning to “famous names” in the field, stems from a suggestion by open-review advocates Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Katherine Rowe in “Keywords for Open Peer Review,” *Logos: The Journal of the World Book Community* 21, nos. 3–4 (2010): 133–41, <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/brill/logo/2010/00000021/F0020003/art00015>.
2. Edward L. Ayers, “The Pasts and Futures of Digital History,” 1999, <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/PastsFutures.html>.
3. Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian” (annual address of the president of the American Historical Association, Minneapolis, December 29, 1931), http://www.historians.org/info/AHA_history/clbecker.htm; Roy Rosenzweig, “Afterthoughts: Everyone a Historian,” web supplement to the book *The Presence of the Past*, 1998, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/survey/>.
4. Matthew Gold, ed., *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), <http://dhdebates.org>.
5. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 18.
6. Dan Cohen, “The Ivory Tower and the Open Web: Introduction: Burritos, Browsers, and Books (Draft),” *Dan Cohen’s Digital Humanities Blog*, July 26, 2011, <http://www.dancohen.org/2011/07/26/the-ivory-tower-and-the-open-web-introduction-burritos-browsers-and-books-draft/>.
7. David Thelen, “History After the *Enola Gay* Controversy: An Introduction,” *Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (1995): 1029–35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2945110>.
8. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso, 1994); Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
9. Lily Patience Moya, Sibusisiwe Makhanya, Shula Marks, and Mabel Palmer, *Not Either an Experimental Doll: The Separate Worlds of Three South African Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).
10. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995); David William Cohen, *The Combining of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1993).
11. Anaclet Pons, “La Escritura Histórica Digital: Teoría y Práctica,” *Clionauta: Blog De Historia*, December 19, 2011, <http://clionauta.wordpress.com/2011/12/19/la-escritura-historica-digital-teoria-y-practica/>.
12. Read more about prior open-review experiments and about Comment-

Press, a WordPress plug-in originally developed by Eddie Tejada and the Institute for the Future of the Book (<http://www.futureofthebook.org/commentpress/>), in Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence*, 116–27.

13. Cheryl Greenberg, comment on Adrea Lawrence, “Learning How to Write Traditional and Digital History,” *Writing History in the Digital Age*, web-book ed., Fall 2011 version.

14. Amanda Seligman, Fred Gibbs, and Kathryn Tomasek, comments on John Theibault, “Visualizations and Historical Arguments,” *Writing History in the Digital Age*, web-book ed., Fall 2011 version.

15. Jeremy McGinniss and Jonathan Jarrett, comments on Amanda Sikarskie, “Citizen Scholars: Facebook and the Co-creation of Knowledge,” *Writing History in the Digital Age*, web-book ed., Fall 2011 version.

16. Robert Wolff, “Beyond the Historical Profession,” *Writing History in the Digital Age*, web-book ed., Fall 2011 version.

17. Charlotte Rochez, “Online Conference: How Historians Research, Write, and Publish in the Digital Age,” *Researching the Histories of Home Education and Learning at Home*, April 2011, <http://historyofhomebasededucation.blogspot.com/2011/04/online-conference-how-historians.html>; Charlotte Rochez, “Writing History in the Digital Age,” *Researching the Histories of Home Education and Learning at Home*, November 2011, <http://historyofhomebasededucation.blogspot.com/2011/11/writing-history-in-digital-age.html>.

18. Cheryl Greenberg, comment on “Introduction,” *Writing History in the Digital Age*, web-book ed., Fall 2011 version.

19. Fitzpatrick and Rowe, “Keywords for Open Peer Review.”

20. Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence*, chap. 1.

21. See online debate about the publishing industry and developmental editing between Zachary Schrag (“Guest Post: More Babies in That Bathwater,” *The Aporetic*, October 31, 2011, <http://theaporetic.com/?p=2776>) and Dan Cohen (“What Will Happen to Developmental Editing?,” *Dan Cohen’s Digital Humanities Blog*, November 17, 2011, <http://www.dancohen.org/2011/11/17/what-will-happen-to-developmental-editing/>).

22. Tim Burke, commentator at the 2012 symposium of the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education, “Collaborations through Open-Access Scholarly Publications on WordPress,” Arlington, VA, April 2012. See also Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence*, 40.

23. Shawn Graham, comment on “Introduction,” *Writing History in the Digital Age*, web-book ed., Fall 2011 version.

