The *JAH* in the Digital Age: A Conversation

Opening Remarks

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by

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Welcome to "The *JAH* in the Digital Age: A Conversation." Our hope is to bring together

discussions about digital history that have been taking place within the *Journal of American*

History with those in the profession more broadly. Digital history is a diverse and dynamic field

and community of research, teaching, and presentation that has become integral to the

profession. How are journals like the *JAH*, which once relied on print publication but which

have evolved in their own ways, best to engage with digital history? I'll speak for about 20

minutes about what the world of digital history has looked like from within the *JAH* over the last

few years, during which time I was Assistant Editor. After that we'd like to hear from you.

Please also feel free to share your ideas with me via email at dmprior@unm.edu and on twitter,

where I am @davidmprior78.

It will help to first describe what the *JAH* looks like from the inside. The *JAH* is the

leading scholarly publication and the journal of record in American history. Published quarterly,

it features peer-reviewed essays, forums on the state of the field, "interchanges" on evolving

research topics, and reviews of books, exhibitions, movies, and digital history projects. The staff

of the *JAH* also produce and maintain: a large, curated bibliographic database, *Recent*

Scholarship Online; web content, including "teaching the *JAH*;" and podcasts of interviews.

The *JAH* derives its revenue from institutional subscriptions, individual members of the

Organization of American Historians (OAH), and advertising. The *JAH* also has business

relationships with Oxford University Press (OUP), which oversees the printing, promotion, and

distribution of the *JAH*, and the History Department at Indiana University (IU), which provides

financial support and staff.

The *JAH* has a substantial in-house staff and a complex division of labor. The Editor

serves renewable 5-year terms with the *Journal* after an open and competitive job search and

holds a tenure-track position in IU's History Department. The Editor develops long-term projects, including special issues, forums, and interchanges and has final authority on all *JAH* content, including all article manuscripts.

The Managing Editor serves full time at the *Journal* and oversees the peer review process, which includes reading and assigning reviewers for over 200 essay submissions per year. Additionally, the Managing Editor works closely with the Editor on all long-term planning. Collaborating with the Editor and the Managing Editor is an Associate Editor, currently Judith Allen, on loan from the History Department at IU part-time for a three-year term. Together, the Managing and Associate Editor from the department read all essays submitted to the *JAH* and all reader reports.

Two more Associate Editors, Cynthia Yaudes and Kevin Marsh, work full time editing all of the *Journal's* published content and are responsible for the *Journal's* high prose standards. This is deep, substantive editing that requires specialized skills and close familiarity with professional historical scholarship.

The Assistant Editor, currently Jessie Kindig, holds a two-year postdoctoral position with the *JAH* and the IU History Department. The Assistant Editor oversees the *JAH's* book review program, commissioning and reading approximately 600 reviews per year.

Five Editorial Assistants work part-time at the *JAH* while pursuing graduate studies at IU, and are responsible for helping with the production of the *Journal*, checking the sources of articles that are past peer review, proofing all final content through cross-reading, and maintaining the *Recent Scholarship Online* database.

Three undergraduate interns and one administrative assistant help maintain our internal database, develop our digital content, and copy-edit. The *JAH* also has a Business Manager and one Web Specialist, both shared with the OAH, which is also located at IU.

The above staff work in a house owned by Indiana University, which allows for regular and sometimes heated conversation among all staff members, including about the *JAH's* relationship with digital history. The *JAH* staff prides itself on a culture that values frank opinions from staff of all academic ranks.

The *JAH* also has an editorial board composed of twelve external scholars who serve three-year terms and help review essay submissions and advise the editors.   Finally, the *JAH* has six contributing editors who consult with us on specific topics, including Jeff McClurken, who has been of great help as the *JAH* thinks through its engagement with digital history.

That is a detailed but hopefully informative explanation of what the *JAH* looks like as an organization.

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What are the questions about digital history that have preoccupied the *JAH* in the last few years? There are six that were particularly prominent during my recent time at the *JAH*, and they ran and still run the gamut of what the *JAH* does, from peer reviewing to publishing content to interacting with our readers. To start things off, it may help to address two of the livelier and more divisive topics associated with digital history and digital scholarship more generally.

First, what should the *JAH* do to increase the accessibility of our content? "Open Access" is a major concern for many digital historians. One of the advantages of our contract with OUP is that it allows us to release some content for free on the web, such as our "Editor's Choice" article, "Teaching the *JAH*" content, and our *Interchanges*. Another advantage is that

OUP works to expand institutional subscriptions around the globe. When these institutional subscriptions are combined with the members of the OAH, to whom the *JAH* is grateful, the *JAH* has a large and inclusive network of people who are interested in our content. Our informed guess is that this network, in addition to being a crucial source of revenue, is a more reliable source of readers than would be posting all of the *JAH's* content online for free. While increasing accessibility is, in and of itself, something the *JAH* values, it is worth bearing in mind that accessibility and readership aren't exactly the same thing.

Additionally, as intriguing as "Open Access" is, the *JAH* is in a situation where it does not feel a need to fix something that doesn't seem to be broken. Although access to the *JAH* requires either individual or institutional fees, the *JAH* has little if any evidence that there are substantial numbers of people who want to read the *JAH* but who are priced out of access. If the *JAH* were to receive requests for access from people or institutions who could not afford membership dues, the editors would take their requests seriously. Also, OAH members and institutional subscribers continue to believe *JAH* content is worth its modest cost.

Second, the *JAH* staff have found themselves debating, as have others, whether double-blind peer review is both meaningful and optimal? The double-blind process has long been susceptible to breakdown, especially in small subfields where everybody knows each other. But search engines and personal webpages mean that, for quite some time, nearly any reviewer can identify an author simply by searching for their paper's title. One scholar has declared double-blind review "a fiction."[1] Interestingly, this challenge to the double-blind process may have developed right as many subfields were growing large enough to otherwise ensure anonymity.

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[1] Jonathan Katz, quoted in "Rejecting Double Blind," *Inside Higher Ed*, May 31, 2011. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/05/31/american_economic_association_abandons_double_blind_journal_reviewing.

So what should the *JAH* do? Should it withhold paper titles from peer reviewers? Should the *JAH* ask manuscript authors to remove from their online C.V.s any references to conference papers with similar titles? Should it ask that authors not blog about their research before the peer review process is complete? The latter is not only a lost cause but also probably counter-productive. The *JAH* would force scholars experimenting with new media to go elsewhere for publication. So should the *JAH* abandon double-blind review? Or should it ask authors and reviewers to do their best to uphold the principle? Even if double-blind review does still work, should the *JAH* experiment with open review processes that involve piecemeal, crowd-sourced feedback?[2] Would such a review process be especially useful for digital projects that go through multiple iterations? Should the *JAH* go further and embrace triple-blind review, using its internal database to hide author's names from the editors? Would authors prefer a choice?

Interestingly, the *JAH* never had – in my albeit limited time – an author request an alternative approach to peer review, and digital historians have stressed to the *JAH* that they would prefer an orthodox double-blind review for their own work. Because the *JAH* review process – which involves close readings by editors, editorial board members, outside readers, and, if accepted, Associate Editors and Editorial Assistants – is so rigorous, it remains highly valued. The editors also have a sense that a great many of the *JAH's* reviewers strive to honor the double-blind nature of the peer review process, for which they are grateful. But it is

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[2] See Jeffrey R. Young, "Blog Comments and Peer Review Go Head to Head to See Which Makes a Book Better," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 22, 2008, available at: http://chronicle.com.libproxy.unm.edu/article/Blog-Comments-vs-Peer-Review/425/; Roopika Risam, "Rethinking Peer Review in the Age of Digital Humanities," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology* 4 (2014), available at: http://adanewmedia.org/2014/04/issue4-risam/; Scott Jaschik, "Kill Peer Review or Reform It?" *Inside Higher Ed*, January 6, 2012, available at: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/01/06/humanities-scholars-consider-role-peer-review; Patricia Cohen, "Scholars Test Web Alternative to Peer Review," *New York Times*, August 23, 2010, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/24/arts/24peer.html.

important to the *JAH* to be transparent with its authors and readers about what its peer review process is. If the *JAH's* authors, manuscript reviewers, and readers doubted whether double-blind review was really double-blind, the *JAH* would certainly think about its policies.

With Open Access and double-blind review, the *JAH* is aware of and interested in the broader conversations taking place within the humanities. But in both cases the *JAH* does not as yet feel that revising policies on these topics will enhance the journal's ability to produce scholarship and deliver it to interested readers. That said, the editors know the scholarly landscape is changing rapidly, and that the *JAH* may have to change with it. With the remaining four of six questions, the *JAH* staff did find greater need for and room to experiment.

The third question the staff grappled with was what to do with article submissions that contain digitally-enhanced content? In the last few years the *JAH* has received a small but growing number of submissions that combine traditional print essays and web-based content. This content can include maps, graphs, primary sources, data, and visualizations of topic models and social networks, often with interactive features that are difficult and even impossible to recreate in print. The *JAH* anticipates receiving more submissions along these lines in the coming years, and that web-based content will become increasingly integral to how authors present arguments.

This digitally-enhanced content, while exciting and welcome, raises questions. With peer review, should the *JAH* require authors to pull related content from university servers to ensure anonymity? Who should host the content if an article is accepted for publication, the author, the author's institution, or the *JAH*? If the text of the digital content is integral to the article, should the *JAH* edit and proof it to ensure that it conforms to the *JAH's* prose style and standards? And

who is responsible for maintaining the content five, fifteen, or fifty years down the road when compatibility issues develop?

The *JAH* has dealt with digitally-enhanced submissions carefully but on an ad hoc basis. The solutions we came up with are short-term fixes that will likely need to be replaced down the road. We decided, for example, that authors of digitally-enhanced articles must locate their digital content on pages and servers that protect the author's anonymity while their work is under review. We also decided that if authors wanted their digital content referenced in the header of their article, the authors needed to commit to maintaining a static version of that content, and that the *JAH* could link to but would not duplicate this content on its own webpage. Finally, we decided that, at least for the short term, in those cases where a digitally-enhanced article passed through the review process and went to publication, the *JAH* would edit the text of the related digital content.

The *JAH* is also aware of broader questions about how the profession should review born-digital projects and about what the future of research is. What will the *JAH* do when it receives an article submission that is so deeply reliant on data-driven, interactive graphs, maps, and images that it would be self-defeating to render it on the printed page? It has now been a decade since the *JAH's* Bloomington neighbors, the *American Historical Review*, experimented with born-digital content.[3] Such work is not yet conventional in the profession, but may yet become so as universities train digital humanists.

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[3] See Philip J. Ethington, "Los Angeles and the Problem of Historical Knowledge: A Multimedia Essay to Accompany the December Issue of *The American Historical Review*; available at http://cwis.usc.edu/dept/LAS/history/historylab/LAPUHK/; William G. Thomas III and Edward L. Ayers, "The Difference Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of Two American Communities," available at http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/AHR/; and William G. Thomas III, "Writing A Digital History Journal Article from Scratch: An Account," December 2007, available at http://digitalhistory.unl.edu/essays/thomasessay.php#11.

Fourth, how should the *JAH* determine what counts for digital scholarship and what types of digital history are out there? How high should the bar be before scholars refer to something as digital history? Is it enough that an article link to digitized primary sources? If topic modeling is digital history, why not cliometrics (or is it)? At this point, arguably, everyone is doing some form of digital scholarship. Likewise, the *JAH* simply cannot function without the digital world, and everything it does from its podcast series to its peer review process has been reliant on digital tools for quite some time. Are print journals really outside of the realm of digital history? I would argue that whether or not a journal produces a paper copy of its content does not tell you much about its digital engagement. But more to the point, specialists in digital history are still working through how to define and categorize their work, as was clear in an "Interchange" that the *JAH* held on digital history in 2008 and in a number of recent statements.[4]

In one sense these questions are tangential to what the *JAH* does on a daily basis. As long as the scholarship is good and germane the *JAH* will try to evaluate it or, if it is already published, find a way to review it. The question of what counts as digital scholarship does, however, pose some problems as the *JAH* works to signal its interest in and give support to this field. What actions can the *JAH* take that are: 1) within its means; 2) different from what it already does, 3) beneficial to digital history; and 4) likely to engage the interest of the *JAH's* extensive audience of American historians? Because digital history is in flux, it is difficult to craft a long-term plan that meets all four of these criteria. For that reason, much of what the *JAH* has done has been project-to-project and day-to-day. It would be especially helpful to the *JAH* to

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[4] "Interchange: The Promise of Digital History," *Journal of American History* 95:2 (September 2008), available at: http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/issues/952/interchange/. A very short list of some more recent statements include, "A Digital History Manifesto," May 29, 2009, available at: http://manifesto.humanities.ucla.edu/2009/05/29/the-digital-humanities-manifesto-20/; the short 2011 query about the nature of digital history, available here: http://digitalhumanities.org/answers/topic/what-is-digital-humanities; and William G. Thomas III, "What is Digital Scholarship? A Typology," available at: http://railroads.unl.edu/blog/

have a sense of whether some forms of digital history lend themselves to journal publication more so than others. Are there some areas or aspects of digital history that the *JAH* should focus on?

Fifth, it is also the case that innovations in digital scholarship are making it more difficult to put scholarship into boxes. Should a 150,000-word publication that is born-digital and contains hundreds of links be reviewed as a book or as a digital history project? What should the *JAH* do with the growing number of books that are published alongside extensive, dynamic webpages? For these reasons, the *JAH* has started a series entitled "Metagraph: Innovations in Form and Content," focusing on monographs that have "gone Meta." This series includes *JAH* research articles that have substantial digital components as well as feature reviews, the longest that the *JAH* runs, that focus expressly on evaluating how authors have combined traditional and non-traditional formats. The editors' intent with this series is to draw attention to the ways in which scholars are merging traditional and non-traditional scholarship, and to encourage sustained discussion of whether and how their experiments work. In this way, the *Metagraph* series complements the *JAH's* longer-running and more extensive series of digital projects reviews. Also of note, Jeff McClurken has recently revised the *JAH's* digital projects review guidelines to include a broader array of born-digital projects.

Sixth, what steps should the *JAH* take to establish a presence in the overlapping worlds of social media and the blogosphere? While an initial answer might be, "everything it can," there are a number of issues the *JAH* has to consider. The first is that the *JAH* already has a digital network – one that rests on a membership database, website, and email – that connects the *JAH* to American historians. The `second is that the *JAH* is financially dependent on its subscribers. Its staff have to consider any new ventures at least in part in terms of what these will do to help

sustain the *JAH* and the OAH. The third is that the staff have to make these decisions in the

context of the *JAH's* multiple relationships. OUP, for example, already does a great job

promoting the *Journal's* content using social media. None of that, however, has limited the

staff's enthusiasm for trying something new.

In fact, as many of you may have noticed, the OAH, JAH, and *The American Historian*

recently launched a blog, *Process* (www.processhistory.org). *Process* focuses on members,

professional issues, scholarship, and teaching, and thereby serves to engage with the vibrant

community of historians that has taken shape on the web over the last decade. At this early

stage, the *JAH* is focusing on contributing two kinds of content. First, it produces *JAH*-centric

material, such as interviews with recent *JAH* authors about how they researched and wrote their

pieces, and retrospectives on classic *JAH* articles. In the future, the *JAH* plans to use the blog to

lift the veil about how the *JAH* works from the inside out. The staff are also open to using the

blog in the future as a space for some of the excellent material that does not fit within the printed

pages of the *JAH*. For example, the editors could imagine hosting additional photos of museum

exhibits to supplement reviews. The second kind of content that *JAH* staff produce focuses on

the history profession. This includes conversations with emerging scholars about their

dissertations, authors of books that catch the editors' eyes, historians experimenting with

teaching, and scholars who can offer a perspective on current events or cultural phenomena. The

JAH's managing editor, associate editor, graduate student editorial assistants, and an

undergraduate intern have overseen this production process.

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That is a lot of information from us, but we hope it will help convey what the field and

community of digital history has looked like from within the walls of the crowded and busy *JAH*

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house for the past few years. Much of the conversation in the field of digital history is about possibilities associated with open access, social networking, and new research methodologies. The *JAH* is very excited about the profession's digital future, but also has to balance that enthusiasm with an eye on a tight budget. The *JAH* staff work at full capacity, so embracing a new venture entails trade-offs.

That said, the challenges the *JAH* faces reflect issues across the profession as a whole, including within digital history. These are issues – such as those concerning sustainability, scarcity, ownerships, and accessibility – that all of us should be concerned with. So I would like to conclude by suggesting that, far from being divided into two camps, one digital and one non-digital, the profession as a whole finds itself in an unprecedented predicament. The digital age has opened up to the profession a host of new opportunities, but these are wrapped up with complex and overlapping problems.

Our intent in sharing these thoughts is to elicit feedback from you, in hopes that we can move forward together with the best interests of the profession in mind. We welcome you to ask questions about, share reflections on, and raise criticisms of any of the details mentioned here. We also invite you to go big and share with us your vision of the futures of digital history and of journal publication. What do you think the *JAH* should do? Don't be shy, we'd love to hear your thoughts.