

E-Scholarship: Is It Something Truly New and Different?

Over the past two years, this department has focused not on new technologies themselves but on what these technologies can deliver. That two-year period has seen a huge growth in the resources available online for scholarship and teaching and a great experimentation in the forms of what we now call *e-scholarship*. It has also seen the launching of a new forum for exploring the possibilities of e-scholarship: the Scholarly Communication Institute.

In the summer of 2003, at the invitation of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), a working group of fifteen higher education presidents, provosts, scholars, and digital resource innovators met at Dartmouth University to launch the institute. Their eyes were on nothing less than how information technologies might beneficially transform the print-era system of scholarly communication. Their concern was that although scholars have replaced their typewriters with word-processors and often search JSTOR rather than library shelves for back issues of journals, many—humanists in particular—still tend to produce and publish the same kinds of monographs and journal articles that they produced and published before digitization.

Some notable exceptions are opening up new ideas of what scholarly communication can be and do. For example, the institute's working group took a close look at a project called "The Valley of the Shadow," created by scholars in the Center for Digital History at the University of Virginia. The Web site (<http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/>) gives the following de-



Illustration by Philip Kaake, © 2004

scription of this project: "The Valley Project details life in two American communities, one Northern and one Southern, from the time of John Brown's Raid through the era of Reconstruction. In this

digital archive you may explore thousands of original letters and diaries, newspapers and speeches, census and church records, left by men and women in Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin

County, Pennsylvania. Giving voice to hundreds of individual people, the Valley Project tells forgotten stories of life during the era of the Civil War."

Clearly, this is a Web publication. But is it a truly new and different form of scholarly communication? Although the project was carried out within the University of Virginia's library, using digital library skills, support, and standards, a team of scholars headed by Professor Edward L. Ayers devised the publication. They conducted an extensive search of primary sources, exercised professional judgment to select the materials used, and employed historical knowledge and training to provide narrative contexts for the materials.

So far, this may sound like a traditional documentary edition. But using digital technology, the Virginia scholars have constructed "click-on" menus more flexible and far-reaching than printed indices. The menus help readers and researchers choose appropriate documents in the database to pursue special interests. Moreover, this online publication includes image and sound files and tools for accessing them. It also offers electronic links to other sources of Civil War-era information.

Unlike traditional printed monographs and articles, this Web publication does not advance a thesis, with supporting citations to primary and secondary sources. But does that make it less a work of scholarship? Does the unconventionality of the medium disqualify its authors for academic rewards? In the past, the answer would likely have been "yes," since evaluators of scholarly work have been unaccustomed to considering such Web publications in reviewing candidates for promotion and tenure.

Looking more broadly to the future, are new forms of humanistic publication limited to Web-accessible, hyperlinked, multimedia databases, or can expositions of research-based theses also be meaningfully enhanced by technological applications? Will future publications remain static, like books, or will they be continuously revisable—and interactively

arguable—like electronic texts and databases? Will the ability of the Internet to connect both resources and scholars in multiple institutions foster collaborative research projects in the humanities as well as in the sciences?

These are some of the questions that were discussed by the working group for the new Scholarly Communication Institute. To continue the discussion, and to involve developing scholars as well as established experts, the working group set up a plan for conducting the institute as an annual forum. The plan calls for a week-long session of the institute each summer at the University of Virginia, where centers for innovation in digital scholarship can support the work of the institute participants.

The plan is to host several teams of innovators—including scholars, librarians, publishers, and information technologists—who will interact with a group of thinkers familiar with new methods of knowledge creation and dissemination. The teams will challenge each other and stimulate their respective explorations on the frontiers of digital scholarship. The institute program will be designed to foster discussion and interaction in lieu of lectures and papers. The Scholarly Communication Institute is intended to inspire what will become a network of innovators, establishing or developing centers of excellence in digital scholarship nationwide. The institute will provide leadership not only by evaluating what e-scholarship is now, but also by identifying what it can perhaps become—something truly new and different.

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