Open Peer Review for Digital Humanities Projects: A Modest Proposal

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The Problem:

Promotion and tenure (P&T) values do not always align with to the practice of digital humanities in academic settings. In short, it's just easier to measure the value of a publication in a well-known journal or a book-length monograph from a trusted university press. Articles are cited and monographs are reviewed, but digital humanities projects are a less-known product--they come in so many flavors and are disseminated by disparate channels. As a result, many digital humanists may be pressured (after investing many hours of labor in a project) to seek validation for their digital projects by writing one or more articles describing the work for traditional peer reviewed outlets. This discourages further work on the digital project, creating a culture in which the project need only be good enough to describe in an article. It also punishes the digital humanist by doubling up on their efforts to meet the bar of P&T.

Nancy L. Maron and Sarah Pickle's Ithaka S+R report, *Sustaining the Digital Humanities: Host Institution Support beyond the Start-Up Phase* (2014) reveals how the current system of academic reward might be titled against the digital humanities. From the three ranks of professor (assistant, associate, and full) surveyed, by and large, more associate professors reported as being digital project leaders or creators. Maron and Pickle hypothesize that associate professors because they are tenured "have more freedom to experiment with new types of resources, but as faculty who are generally younger than their full professor counterparts, they are also more open to digital experimentation" (16). The report implies that untenured, junior faculty members, (already feeling the anxiety of the stress-inducing P&T process) may wonder if spending their precious and limited time on a digital project will hurt their case for tenure. Maron and Pickle report that one of the junior faculty members leading a digital projects noted "Will my project 'count'? I really don't know, and I need to be protective of my time in case it doesn't" (Maron & Pickle, 15-16). Clearly, an investment of a faculty member's time needs a return; digital humanities projects must "count" for P&T. Without new incentive structures that digital humanists can leverage in the P&T process, the adoption of digital humanities practices will lag and the field's experimental and boundary-testing nature will be diminished.

The Solution:

Peer review. Peer review is a concept and not a method. It can be unbound from the print journal and applied to any product. When peer review is applied in a reproducible, fair, and transparent manner across a community of scholars, it will begin to acquire the credentialing characteristics that P&T committees rely on. For digital humanities projects, peer review is best conducted openly. Blind pre-publication peer review does not work for a digital project that (by necessity) may be required to grow, evolve and change on the open web. Nor should one expect for such a project to be zipped up and submitted to a manuscript management system.

Furthermore, the reviews (if open) will give the digital humanist much needed qualitative evidence for their promotion and tenure narratives. Likewise, these reviews in the open, give the reviewer something to point to for their own efforts; in fact, the reviews themselves would have the potential to contribute to generalized knowledge--even, perhaps, guiding the practice of digital humanities, more broadly.

The Key Elements:

People: Peer review is a struggle across all academic publishing sectors--namely, finding the people to do the work is itself no small bit of work. Thus, finding the people that will commit to serving as open reviewers of digital humanities projects is the first and most important step. While any committed people might suffice, it will help if these people are affiliated in some manner with a professional or scholarly organization. This affiliation will grant a modest level of authority to the project and will increase the likelihood that the project will outlive its initial generations.

For the sake of making this a concrete exercise, let's say that a regional, professional organization, such as Academic Libraries of Indiana (ALI) will sponsor this activity (http://academiclibrariesofindiana.org). At virtually no financial expense, ALI could provide oversight, institutional memory, and (possibly) the initial members of the review board. ALI could also play a role in identifying and recommending digital humanities projects for review. With a motivated leader from ALI to serve as a chief-wrangler for the reviewers, it's likely that the effort could establish a list of a half dozen ALI-affiliated reviewers in short order. If these six people would commit to writing two reviews per year, the collective would have the beginnings of a healthy publication schedule.

Rubrics: Most journals include some kind of instructions for their reviewers. These instructions promote a consistency across time and also assist the reviewers in their evaluations of the submitted articles. In this case the rubric, like the reviews themselves, will be open. It will be posted at a stable URL and with reference to all prior versions (at stable URLs). This will enable creators, authors, and readers to assess the exact consequence of the review granted to the digital project. And, if need be, to leave explanatory responses or to request a reassessment.

Scope of the Rubric: One group of reviewers need not review all aspects of a digital humanities project. In this suggested example, ALI could focus on those elements of a digital humanities project that it believes to have the best credentials to evaluate. Because ALI is an organization in the library science profession, it would make sense for the review collective to develop a rubric that focuses on things that the profession cares about--perhaps the rubric would be limited to one or more of the following: openness, bibliographic documentation, metadata, usability, intellectual property, and digital preservation.

Structure of the Rubric: Although the collective of reviewers with guidance from its sponsoring organization should define the structure of the rubric, let's imagine two features--a qualitative section and one or more quantitative sections. The qualitative section would give the reviewer a

chance to leave open-ended comments on the quality of the digital humanities project. This would prove to be advantageous for both the reviewer and the reviewed. The prose comment could serve to add to the broader discussion on the state of the art and as such would be a scholarly artifact attributable to the author, the reviewer. Likewise, the reviewed may quote and cite positive assessments of their work in their P&T narratives. In contrast, the quantitative section could score elements on a scale. With all reviewers using the same scale and, as reviews accumulate, these quantitative scores will gain value. The reviewers will begin to develop a in-practice consensus, while the reviewed will be able to report improvements in the score (if a revision is submitted for review). Ultimately, both P&T evaluators and readers at large will have a context for understanding the significance of a score and the qualitative comments.

Creating and Maintaining the Rubric: After finding the people that are willing to commit to writing reviews, finding the people that are willing to create and maintain the rubric should be a first step in pursuing this modest proposal. The rubric may be very simple, but it should not go without commentary and definition. Properly created, the rubric will be a work of scholarship in its own right--a model and starting place for future rubric development and use. To merit the trust of its users and sponsors, the rubric should be revisited annually and revised openly.

Technology: As a starting point, this should not be an experimental or adventurous use of technology. A new technology will only distract from the work at hand--reviewing digital humanities projects. Even so, there are some technical features that will make this work easier to do and more rewarding for all involved. These include at least one web page describing the project, naming the members of the review board, linking to the rubric, and providing instructions for requesting a review or replying to a review. Initially, the same web page can provide a list of all projects reviewed and their reviews. As an initial setup, the reviews may be published anywhere--assuming that they are on an open access website with a stable URL, preferably a DOI. Furthermore, these reviews should be published with a Creative Commons license to enable future iterations of the technology and (more importantly) to give the creators of the digital humanities projects permission to reuse them to their professional advantage.

Digital Projects: In the initial years of the venture, digital humanities projects in need of review will be identified by the members of the reviewing collective. The creators of digital humanities projects should not be expected to submit their work; at first, few of these creators will be likely to know about the service. Reviews will be offered freely and openly to the projects that merit them. The creators of these digital humanities projects, however, should expect fair treatment and the opportunity to respond to and request a re-scored or second review following an revision. The scope of projects eligible for review could be limited by the values and interests of the sponsoring organization. If, for example, ALI agreed to sponsor this activity, the reviewers might decide to limit themselves to projects initiated at ALI institutions or to projects with an Indiana connection of some kind. But, in the startup phase, one wouldn't want to over invest in defining the scope; the initial effort, rather, should focus on finding projects that need review and finding projects that will appeal to the interests of the reviewers. The scope can be refined when the demand for reviews outstrips the time commitments of the reviewers.

Coda:

The initial version of this proposal, drafted by Jere Odell and Caitlin Pollock, is available in a stable form at IUPUI ScholarWorks. It was written in response to the local needs and evolving P&T guidelines at the authors' institution, IUPUI. It was also composed for potential discussion at THATcamp Indiana 2016--an unconference sponsored the Academic Libraries of Indiana (http://indiana2016.thatcamp.org/).

We would like to acknowledge that this idea is not wholly original, but builds upon well-known efforts to provide new ways of offering peer review. Open peer review, of course, is not a new concept and a few publishers have begun to offer it. The most widely known examples of these efforts are not usually marketed to humanities scholars, nor would they be suitable venues for the peer review of digital humanities projects. The Open Scholarship Project (in development and under the leadership of IUPUI's Jason Kelly) is an exception (Odell & Kelly). In fact, the OSP provides a model for a few concepts reflected in this "modest proposal;" these include: reviews published openly and with DOIs, reviewing rubrics credentialed (with badging) by third party organizations, and a responsive, post-release review schedule. This proposal differs from the OSP in that the reviews need not be published on the same platform as is the scholarly artifact; this is by necessity, as bottling up a digital humanities project for submission to a second digital platform is inconvenient at best and, in many cases, not possible.

This proposal is also informed by methods-based review, such as that offered by *PLOS One*. In this regard, see our assertion that rubric developers need not address all aspects relevant to a quality digital humanities project, but rather only those that they care the most about or those that they are best qualified to evaluate. In the field of Library and Information Science, *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* (EBLIP) provides a good example of post-publication review (and one that focuses on methods), but EBLIP uses a closed-production model and an onsite publication approach. This proposal seeks to offer reviews in conversation with the creation of the digital humanities project.

The Advanced Research Consortium (ARC) from Texas A&M University's Initiative for Digital Humanities, Media, and Culture also provides a partial model for this modest proposal. ARC supports subject-specific "nodes"; three well-known ARC nodes are 18thConnect, NINES, and MESA. ARC supports peer-review processes for digital projects that would like to be included in one of the subject nodes. The ARC documentation of its peer review system states that:

> [...] ARC provides the scholar with legitimization and inclusion into a community of the best aggregated, digital materials in their subject of study. When a node editorial board/community approves the inclusion of the digital resource into ARC, the appropriate node director writes a letter to the scholar detailing that their resource was not only approved by a highly lauded, period-specific editorial board, but describes how their research adds needed knowledge to the scholarly community as a whole. This letter, geared towards tenure and promotion committees, highlights equivalencies to

print publications in order to call attention to the high intellectual quality of the resource. (ARC, Scholarly Peer Review)

ARC's work informs this proposal, however, the subject specific nature of their peer review system excludes digital humanists working in other areas. Nor does ARC facilitate a topic-specific rubric, such as the one described here. Even so, ARC is an inspiration. As 18thConnect specifically states that "Digital humanities projects have long lacked a framework for peer review and thus have often had difficulty establishing their credibility as true scholarship." When many higher education administrators struggle with the ambiguity of "how to establish the 'value' of a project" (Maron & Pickle, 5), efforts like ARC (and this proposal) are a solid step in the right direction. By seeking to replace ambiguity with clarity, this proposal will give the digital humanities a tool that higher education knows well and values--peer review.

Finally, as alluded to above, IUPUI is seeking ways to encourage and reward open access, community-engaged, and public scholarship practices in the P&T process. These efforts have resulted in revisions to the P&T guidelines--revisions that we have watched with great interest. We hope that this proposal will complement these efforts at IUPUI, at other ALI institutions, and for digital humanists everywhere.

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