

# Academic Writing and Digital Media: From On-line Journals to Digital Archives

## Summary by Peter Valdina

On April 9, 2010, a small group of faculty and staff at Emory gathered for an exciting discussion on the topic of scholars writing for digital media. Faculty face many choices about whether and how to engage digital media. Three panelists at this forum discussed issues professors may want to consider upon undertaking digital projects. Dr. Allen Tullos, Associate Professor of American Studies in the ILA and Senior Editor of *Southern Spaces* initiated the conversation, followed by Dr. Gary Laderman, Professor of Religion and Executive Co-editor of *Religion Dispatches*, and Dr. Erika Farr, Director of the Born-Digital Initiatives Archives at Woodruff Library.

*Southern Spaces* is a peer-reviewed internet journal and scholarly forum about the U.S. South, with support from the Mellon Foundation. Reaching about a million readers a year, the online magazine *Religion Dispatches* in 2009 received one of the largest single grants in the humanities in Emory College history from the Ford Foundation. Online publications are not, of course, the only options for digital dissemination of scholarship. To represent one of the other avenues into the digital realm, Erika Farr discussed her work with the archives of Salmon Rushdie. Farr's research concerns digital curation, particularly the scholarly implications of processing and providing access to born-digital and hybrid archives. Amy Benson Brown moderated this event, sponsored by the Author Development Program in the Center for Faculty Development and Excellence at Emory.

For junior faculty especially, the risks and rewards of publishing online are more pronounced. There is some anecdotal evidence, as Dr. Tullos pointed out, that online publication sometimes carries weight in decisions related to academic hiring and tenure. Publications available online can be linked to CVs, making it easier for committees to find a scholar's writing quickly. Some online publications, such as Emory's *Southern Spaces*, archive everything they publish while others may not. Because of this, it is worth considering whether a publication has institutional support that will guarantee that your published work can be accessed in the future. The existence and process of peer review remains an important issue to investigate when considering submission to an online scholarly journal, also.

Gary Laderman, co-editor of *Religion Dispatches*, talked about the new questions that digital scholarship raises for academics who engage the public. As a magazine with a broad readership, this forum involves different professional cultures, such as those of journalism, academic research, and foundations. Digital curation, as Dr. Farr attested, also requires a bridging of different professional cultures, most often among librarians, scholars, and academic presses.

For those planning to start a publication, it is important to be aware that those cultures do not always line up. A writer may submit a story and but later decide to change an element of it that is provocative. Should the ability to alter or retract a story be given to the writers who submit? How might such decisions influence academic or journalistic credibility, and how might sponsors feel about potential controversies?

The time between acceptance and publication is generally faster with online journals than with print journals. This is a real strength for addressing current events. It can also mean that online publications are more likely to generate, and get embroiled in, controversy. Many online publications allow readers to respond through a comment section in real time. This creates a new relationship with the readers as

it allows for interaction, but that interaction can sometimes be negative or contentious.

Online journals also present opportunities for publishing multimedia projects, including video and audio, through systems like iTunes University. Allen Tullos spoke about the “Poets & Place” section of *Southern Spaces* where different types of media augment a written narrative. These types of publications offer great platforms for collaboration; at the same time, though, the collaborative possibilities of new media raise important questions about how to recognize contributors and authors appropriately.

The panelists concurred that, because of the new formatting options available in online publication, it is important to conceptualize how scholarly writing can be broken up into more modular forms. This issue of breaking down and presenting content can make navigation easier for the user. Ideally, schemas for organizing content reflect how users interact with online resources. Search capabilities can also be added, making repositories accessible in the future. Something to consider is the possibility that published material may wind up in a database in a form that is different from its original format. Navigational “tags” and other forms of data can contribute to future accessibility.

Erica Farr also discussed how the very idea of an “archive” has been affected by new technologies. Speaking from her experience, she recounted the creation of research tools installed in the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library (MARBL) reading room that allows users to efficiently sort through a tremendous amount of archival information created on and with personal computers.

New archival formats--such as hard drives and complete computers in addition to books and other papers--also call into question what it means to preserve an archive. Is the physical device important, or just the digital content? What kind of new questions might future researchers ask that are brought about by related to the nature of the media?

Already, archivists are encountering collections that are “born digital” (which means they never had an existence in a purely physical, printed form). Additionally, the legal and privacy concerns associated with such archives are complicated and unresolved. An alternative to copyright protection, offering more control for the author, has been created under the aegis of Creative Commons licensing, but it has yet to gain universal acceptance. Faculty should be aware that Emory maintains an Office for Intellectual Property Rights in Woodruff library as a resource for help with questions about copyright. Contact Director Lisa Macklin for more information about that office.

The websites, articles, and reports listed below offer additional resources for exploring some of the threads of this conversation.

### **Emory-Related Resources**

For background reading, see the *Academic Exchange* article “Digital Scholarship Comes of Age” by Allison Adams (October 2009)

[http://www.emory.edu/ACAD\\_EXCHANGE/2009/octnov/lead.html](http://www.emory.edu/ACAD_EXCHANGE/2009/octnov/lead.html).

For additional background on Dr. Farr’s work, check out “The Author’s Desktop,” an *Emory Magazine* article by Mary Loftus on Rushdie archive.

[http://www.emory.edu/EMORY\\_MAGAZINE/2010/winter/authors.html](http://www.emory.edu/EMORY_MAGAZINE/2010/winter/authors.html)

And visit the journals *Southern Spaces* and *Religion Dispatches* at [www.southernspaces.org](http://www.southernspaces.org) and [www.religiondispatches.org/](http://www.religiondispatches.org/).

ECIT at Woodruff Library also offers support for teachers, writers, and students using a variety of digital media. Check out information about digital story-telling, for instance at: <http://cet.emory.edu/ecit/digitalstorytelling.cfm>

### **Other Resources**

“When Scholars Weigh Publication Options, Tradition Counts” (1/31/10) by Jennifer Howard for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Howard offers a summary of a new study of faculty usage of digital media for publication of scholarship. See the study: “Assessing the Future Landscape of Scholarly Communication: An Exploration of Faculty Values and Needs in Seven Disciplines” from the Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley (Report, 2010) <http://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/publications.php?id=351>

“The Future of Scholarly Publishing” *Chronicle of Higher Education* June 12, 2009  
A special issue on trends in the field, including digital publishing.

“University Publishing in a Digital Age” ITHIKA (Report, 2008, and a 2010 report)  
[www.ithaka.org](http://www.ithaka.org)

“Writing A Digital History Journal Article from Scratch: An Account” (2007).

Essay available through “Digital History” by Dr. William Thomas, III about his experience in crafting an article from scratch for the *American Historical Review*.

<http://digitalhistory.unl.edu/essays/thomasessay.php>