

Essay

De-centering and Re-centering Digital Scholarship, Ten Years On

Matthew Hunter, *University of Pennsylvania*

Aaron Retteen, *Texas A&M University School of Law*

Micah Vandegrift, *National Institutes of Health*

ABSTRACT

Ten years after the publication of a manifesto attempting to describe what digital scholarship could do for and within libraries, some of the original authors reflect on the progress of the call-to-action. This article describes areas in which the integration of digital scholarship activities as core parts of librarianship has and has not become commonplace and traces larger-scale developments in the academy and global knowledge landscape that have contributed to the accuracy of the predictions made in 2017.

KEYWORDS

Digital scholarship, functional specialization, core competencies

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Circling Back

Ten years ago, colleagues in the fledgling Office of Digital Research and Scholarship at Florida State University published a call to action attempting to define what "digital scholarship does." In the article, we hoped to coalesce common threads of a broadly and often stubbornly undefined field into our own daily work in librarianship (Moritz et al., 2017). The article was also a dual effort to establish technology-enhanced research as a seed from which ethics of care and openness could grow in librarianship, as well as a way to push back against developments we saw as detrimental to the contemporary academy.

The paper outlined two major goals. First, it challenged the impulse to build distinct and prescriptive digital scholarship centers (including administrative units, job postings, and dedicated spaces), arguing that these effected a detrimental cloistering of practitioners and conversations from the broader academy's scholarly activity. Second, it argued that to sustain digital scholarship support, and to evolve librarianship into something capable of supporting other new and emerging forms of scholarly practice, librarians must make the concerns of digital scholarship practitioners regular and core functions of the library rather than tangential specialties.

As may be suspected, the article was formulated initially as a response to our own institutional environment at the time—lacking robust infrastructure to support digitally inflected work—as much as it was a response to the broader scholarly landscape. It was not intended as a rebuke of digital scholarship centers that existed elsewhere and indeed was inspired by several institutions that had already made incredible progress in developing sustainable infrastructure, ethical labor practices, and challenges to established models. In effect, the article was part wish list and part mission statement, justifying its "manifesto" title.

What actually happened

In the decade since publication, all seven of the original authors have left FSU scattering to different institutions and, in several cases, to careers entirely outside of libraries and higher education. A new team now runs the Office of Digital Research and Scholarship, bringing its own concerns and expertise to bear on the same underlying question of how best to support digitally inflected work. What's more, critical attention to what the digital scholarship (and/or humanities) center was "doing" in the academy received extensive critical investigation shortly after our original publication, earning its own special volume of the seminal *Debates in Digital Humanities* series in which dozens of authors addressed many of our original concerns (Nieves et al., 2021). Our initial vision for what digital scholarship could affect in librarianship, however, witnessed other continuing radical changes in ways perhaps none of us fully anticipated.

The most significant of those shifts have been political and financial rather than methodological:

- Tenure has narrowed considerably, though largely for reasons that have little to do with digital scholarship specifically. Unrelenting adjunctification and direct attacks on the institution of tenure across the American academic landscape have done far more to reshape

promotion and tenure than any argument we made about recognizing digital outputs (Doležal, 2023; Peet, 2022).

- Direct sources of digital and library funding have been decimated. The National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services' Office of Digital Humanities have all faced hostile federal administrations, crippling efforts to build and sustain the infrastructure our original article assumed would keep expanding (Otis, 2023; Witteveen, 2026).

- Indirect sources have likewise been wiped out. Reductions in federal indirect cost recovery rates have quietly undercut library budgets, and ongoing restrictions against publication charges have limited how broadly authors can disseminate their work (Ginexi, 2026). Even in the face of broad-spectrum acceptance of OA publishing pathways, federal funding access mandates, and the growing prevalence of transformative subscription agreements, this has completely restructured the OA publishing landscape from that of 2017 (Bakker et al., 2024).

- The fight against neoliberal valuation of librarian labor has been absorbed into a larger fight. What felt urgent and specific in 2017 has since become one small piece of an existential effort to justify the academy's relevance to an adversarial political climate and an apathetic public (Bradley, 2021).

The global COVID-19 pandemic accelerated many parts of our argument. Flexible, digitally native modes of work, remote access to materials, and multimedia-friendly infrastructure moved from aspirational to commonplace almost overnight in 2020, in ways that would have seemed optimistic when the original article was written. There was something quietly vindicating in watching the case for openness and access become self-evident when physical alternatives disappeared, even if that vindication arrived through crisis rather than persuasion.

And yet, in spite of all of this, the shape of the work looks remarkably familiar today as it did in 2017. Digital scholarship librarian positions are still regularly posted and often deal with the same questions of supporting digital publication, digital methods across disciplines, and technology literacy. Standalone digital scholarship centers still exist on many campuses (and are newly established with some regularity) even if they are named something more akin to “laboratories” or “hubs” these days. They are usually still staffed by small and overstretched teams. In niche academic communities, such as law, dental, and medical schools, research faculty continue to rely on the main campus for staff and technology support related to digital scholarship, furthering the specialization silos that make producing interdisciplinary scholarship more difficult. Digital scholarship as a discipline still encompasses practitioners from varied disciplines and fosters active practitionership that does not depend on any particular skill level to participate meaningfully. It still embraces a radically wide definition of who can contribute, and what a “contribution” looks like. However, many of the digital methodologies that fit under the big tent of digital scholarship have now become commonplace

in disciplinary methodologies, and new generations of scholars are becoming expert and even self-sufficient in these modes of work as a core and regular part of their own specialization.

Perhaps the most unforeseen addition, supporting a bevy of radical AI literacies and competencies, may in fact have been identifiable to those who were already grappling with machine learning and computer vision approaches in humanities scholarship back in 2017, even if none of us named it as clearly as we should have.

Revisiting the Theses

Though attempting to presage the future is often fraught, several of the original theses held up reasonably well against the intervening decade:

- “Digital Scholarship builds communities.” Digital scholarship still cuts across disciplinary and institutional hierarchies, and still resists the single-author, single-PI model that the rest of the academy defaults to by habit.
- “Digital Scholarship breaks down disciplinary silos.” Liaison work has shifted from an exclusively subject-based model toward a more broadly functional one that has become largely conversant with digital research methods which crept into graduate methodology classes. This has often had the practical effect of increasing the workload on both subject and explicitly functional liaisons rather than relief for either. More work needs to be done within universities to bring research faculty together with digital scholarship specialists, but one mark of success is that more research faculty are aware of these issues today than ever before.

Other theses were overtaken by forces well beyond the scope of what our article, or our field, could have addressed alone, or even foreseen:

- “Digital Scholarship redefines the norms of promotion and tenure.” As mentioned above, this assumed tenure itself would remain a stable enough institution to modify in the first place rather than an object in aspirational survival (Taylor & Watts, 2025). Even so, standards and review processes remain difficult to meaningfully change for certain disciplines, and appropriate credit for innovative research outputs distinct from traditional journal article or monograph outputs remains aspirational. There is progress around the edges and in specific subjects, but more work remains to bridge this gap.
- “Digital Scholarship redefines the relationship between research and teaching.” The hope that an adoption of Open Educational Resources as a normal output of research practice would resolve the textbook affordability crisis did not anticipate that crisis being absorbed into a much larger and more punishing college affordability crisis, compounded by enrollment decline, or various global economic upheavals that have resulted in existential threats to entire departments (Friedman, 2024; Moody, 2026). However, integration between research and pedagogy has seen uneven acceptance across the academy - Law being a prime example.
- “Digital Scholarship reorients the role of the academy.” Attention to community engagement has grown across higher education, but access to information was never really the barrier standing between universities and the communities around them. That remains a trust

problem with a long and complicated history, not an infrastructure problem, and no amount of openness was ever going to resolve it on its own (Rosenblum et al., 2024).

What none of us anticipated in 2017, though, is that artificial intelligence would come to supplant digital scholarship in roughly the same contested, poorly defined, and unevenly distributed position within libraries. AI responsibility shows up in job descriptions without a clear boundary, is layered unevenly atop existing roles, and has begun reshaping what practitioners mean when they talk about supporting scholarly work in ways that echo our own field's earliest growing pains almost precisely. Perhaps AI, too, will find a comfortable home suffused throughout academic practice a decade hence.

Conclusion: More Transformative Than We Thought, Just Not on Schedule

When we wrote the original manifesto, we believed digital scholarship would eventually either succeed in becoming fully central to librarianship or fail integration and remain permanently cloistered at its margins. A decade later, neither outcome describes what actually happened. Digital scholarship's real legacy has turned out to be more diffuse, and in many ways more transformative, than either version of the future we imagined in 2017. It did not conquer the library, nor did it not stay confined to a center, either. Instead, it quietly suffused outward into functional roles, public-facing communication work, and skill sets that now move comfortably between academia, government, and industry in ways that would have been difficult to picture a decade ago. The core skills of digital scholarship also became more commonly incorporated into graduate curricula, and the constant generational treadmill of new faculty hires and retirements have changed the overall landscape of expected support from libraries and provided skills from researchers themselves.

The opportunity we described in 2017 was real, and in a meaningful sense it has been realized, though rarely within the institutional walls we assumed it would require. Recognizing this success is perhaps difficult when faced with the extant realities of the current academic landscape, but it is important to acknowledge. The challenges we failed to anticipate—the collapse of tenure, the evisceration of federal funding, and the disruptive arrival of artificial intelligence—have mattered more than the ones we spent the most energy arguing about. Digital scholarship, it turns out, was never really about centers or job titles in the first place. It was always a question of whether the underlying skills and ethics we were describing could survive sustained contact with an academy under siege. Ten years on, they have, even if they have survived to exist in an academy that looks quite different from the one that first gave them a home.

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