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The Changing Forms of History

Timothy J. Gilfoyle

Should history be a book discipline? It depends. By some measures, history in the Western world has always been a book-oriented enterprise, dating back to the book-length scrolls and texts of Herodotus and Thucydides. Historians tell stories, many of which require in-depth research, analytical acuity, and development of a complex narrative—undertakings that are often best accomplished in the form we call a book. The professionalization of history during the past century magnified the importance of the book. In disciplines such as physics and chemistry, by contrast, specialized journal articles supplanted books as the primary vehicle for presenting scholarship and new discoveries by the early 20th century.¹ Historians remain attached to their books, though many have resorted to a range of other media for explaining and interpreting the past.

Books—that is, the long textual format—will remain a vital component of the work of historians. This is hardly surprising. Book writing is integral to PhD training. The history dissertation is, at the very least, an unpublished, book-length manuscript. Many dissertations do become books. Indeed, historians tend to publish their dissertations at a higher rate than professionals in other disciplines. According to one study published in 1989, some 35 percent of history dissertations eventually became books, while only 13 percent of sociology dissertations were revised into books.²

In the past half century, the publication of books became a—perhaps the—defining quality of professionalism in departments, colleges, and universities emphasizing research. Book publication was interpreted as the most important demonstration that a faculty member had achieved the requisite level of accomplishment to be a “research historian.” The process of external and peer evaluation that usually accompanied book publication, especially with university presses, reinforced this form of professional validation. The development of a relatively independent peer review process across most fields of history, and one similar to



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An art installation at Leadenhall Market in London, the United Kingdom.

that found in other academic disciplines, provided a vehicle through which faculty peers, department chairs, and higher education administrators could evaluate historical scholarship in fields with which they had little, if any, familiarity.

But one size does not fit all. The more specific question to consider is: Should history solely or primarily be a book discipline? For two decades, some have warned that the growing difficulty of publishing a book of history in certain fields demands new standards. University presses are increasingly forced to publish books based on their marketability. Will they attract readers outside a specific or narrow field? Will they find an audience of readers among the educated lay public? Will they be assigned as required reading in history courses? Before 1990, only a few university presses asked such questions. Many relied upon a library marketplace which promised that 1,000 copies of any book would be sold. Twenty-five years later, library sales for many, if not most, university press books approximate 150 copies.³ Although its potential impact has declined considerably, book publication remains

an ideal measure of scholarship in some quarters, particularly colleges and universities that emphasize research and promote faculty engaged in research.

Many excellent historians, however, never earn a PhD or publish a book. For more than a generation, professional historians have adopted an ever-growing and widening variety of styles of scholarship: long-form essays in the tradition of other humanities disciplines; collaboratively authored articles sometimes supported by external funding, as is common for natural science disciplines; published institutional and other histories; digital media products; museum exhibition scripts; and documentary film projects. Public history research projects are particularly noteworthy for their range of historical work: cultural resource management studies, research-based expert reports (including *amicus curiae* briefs) for government and private institutions, the administration and management of historical organizations, the creation of bibliographies and databases, and unpublished oral history compilations are just a few examples of such public history research and scholarship. Digital historians

have remediated older forms of scholarship into new media while simultaneously pioneering new forms of scholarly writing, such as the blog post and the knowledge site. In this regard, professional historians share much in common with other disciplines, including the natural sciences, in which scholarship is presented in article and other formats that are much shorter than a book.⁴ Many departments now include historians who engage in different varieties of scholarly work and production that have different types of impact on the discipline and the broader public, require different types of resources, and necessitate different timelines of production. In the end, history as a scholarly discipline is richer for these multiple forms of scholarship.

A generation ago, the American Historical Association recognized this challenge. In *Redefining Historical Scholarship*, the AHA's Ad Hoc Committee on Redefining Scholarly Work developed appropriate benchmarks for the evaluation of historical scholarship that included many of these new forms of scholarly production.⁵ The committee was responding to the call by Charles Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation to give "scholarship" a broader, more capacious meaning and to bring a new "legitimacy to the full scope of academic work."⁶ *Redefining Historical Scholarship* argued not only for the necessity of enlarging the definition of scholarship, but specifically outlined what historians needed to do in order to move the profession in a direction that recognized the changing scholarly landscape: acknowledge the importance of creative collaboration, which was standard in many other academic disciplines; recognize the ever-growing interdisciplinarity of knowledge; address the transformative methodologies practiced by historians; and incorporate the wide variety of scholarly research by historians and other scholars into tenure and promotion standards and evaluation. Many of these broadly defined issues have been resurrected (if they had ever died) in current debates regarding the treatment and evaluation of digital history projects.

Nevertheless, many in the academy continue to resist, minimize, or disregard such alternative forms of scholarship. The hierarchy embodied by "traditional" peer-reviewed scholarship found in history books and specialized journal articles remains the privileged form of professional

evaluation. I witnessed this firsthand in 2009–10 when the dean of my college and 20 department chairs developed standards for research productivity to determine faculty teaching loads. Many of my colleagues in both history and other humanities departments resisted including public history products in measuring scholarly productivity. Only when presented the benchmarks as outlined in *Redefining Historical Scholarship* did they acknowledge the benefits of a broader, more inclusive measurement of scholarly productivity.⁷ Old traditions die hard.

Two factors explain the resistance. First, different forms of historical scholarship are like apples and oranges: they taste good but are not the same. Is writing the narrative text and display labels for a museum exhibit the same as authoring a book? Even if the word count is similar, do they incorporate comparable forms of historical primary research? Is it realistic to even make such measurements? These and similar questions related to public history projects, digital humanities, and alternative forms of historical scholarship are difficult—maybe impossible—to answer. Nevertheless, until proponents of nontraditional forms of scholarship develop methods of measurement or sets of standards by which we can compare such products with books and peer-reviewed articles, critics will continue to resist.

Second, the criteria developed in *Redefining Historical Scholarship* emphasizes the process of scholarship rather than the final product. Therein lies the rub. A greater range of intensive research activity is considered rather than simply the publication of books or journal articles. Prioritizing the process of research over a final product, however, deemphasizes important questions incorporated in scholarly book and article production: how to measure the originality and degree of innovation manifested in the research activity; how to assess the difficulty of the research task accomplished; and how to evaluate the scope and importance of the research activity within a subfield of study. Undoubtedly some of this happens in many public and other alternative history projects, but in less explicit ways that may be harder to measure.

Historians arguably enjoy more venues for the display of their historical work and research than professionals in most disciplines. Books, journal articles, museum

exhibits, newspaper editorials, and a wide variety of public history work play different roles in history education and the broader civic discourse. All are engaged in the larger goal of propagating and promoting history. Debates over what constitutes "acceptable scholarship" will not go away. Indeed, the debates will increase in volume as new forms, exemplified today by digital humanities, further complicate and fertilize this diversity. Historians should avoid any rigid hierarchy of scholarship. More than ever, we need guidelines for assessing digital and other alternative research projects. History needs and deserves a big tent.

Timothy J. Gilfoyle is professor and former chair of history at Loyola University Chicago and the current president of the Urban History Association.

Notes

1. Elisabeth S. Clemens, Walter W. Powell, Kris McIlwaine, and Dina Okamoto, "Careers in Print: Books, Journals and Scholarly Reputations," *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (1995): 434, 437.
2. Herbert C. Morton, Anne J. Price, and Robert A. Mitchell, *The ACLS Survey of Scholars* (Washington, DC: American Council of Learned Societies, 1989), 69, cited in Clemens et al., 434 n4.
3. E-mail correspondence, Timothy Mennel to Timothy Gilfoyle, Dec. 22, 2014, in author's possession.
4. Clemens et al., 433–94.
5. American Historical Association, *Redefining Historical Scholarship: Report of the American Historical Association Ad Hoc Committee on Redefining Historical Scholarship* (December 1993), <http://www.historians.org/redefining-historical-scholarship>.
6. Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities for the Professoriate* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990), 16, <https://depts.washington.edu/gs630/Spring/Boyer.pdf>.
7. See "Standards for Research-Intensive and Research-Active Faculty," Loyola University Chicago Department of History Faculty Resources webpage, http://www.luc.edu/history/Faculty_Resources1.shtml, accessed Dec. 26, 2014.