Whither digital humanities? As scholars in the humanities turn ever more to new technologies to advance their research and publications, the academy now needs to formulate (and formalize) questions about where the field is going. At their last meeting of the winter quarter, CESTA’s Digital Humanities Fellows had a conversation about the systems of value and evaluations that are being made to assess dh projects.

The most salient points of conversation concerned the more fractious nature of judging digital projects, its implications for the traditional single-author monograph, and the effects of such projects on the role of the humanities to two constituencies: the academy and the public.

The further humanists venture with digital tools, the more they enter the realm of experts in other fields. A book review might critique the format of a publication, but its *raison d’etre* is to assess issues of content like quality of research and argumentation, or contributions to the field writ large; a single reader with knowledge of the subject field fulfills this essential form of “peer review.”

Not so with projects that support traditional research with complicated digital architectures. Take [*Enchanting the Desert*](http://enchantingthedesert.com/), the first born-digital, peer-reviewed monograph to be published by Stanford University Press, in which scholars, librarians, and designers worked together to create a work of digital scholarship from the ground up. As Nicole Coleman, Research Director of the Humanities + Design Lab pointed out, a credible review of such a digital project must come to resemble the collaborative composition of that project itself. A scholar might review content, a librarian the access and archivability of the project, while a designer could account for the feel and interaction of the platform.

What sort of provisions have been put in place for such multivariable judgments, ones that can and should factor in major career assessments like fellowships, hiring, and tenure? Standards are arriving. As of February 2016, my own field of art and architecture history has just released the [first discipline-wide guidelines](http://www.collegeart.org/news/2016/02/23/the-college-art-association-and-the-society-of-architectural-historians-release-guidelines-for-the-evaluation-of-digital-scholarship-in-art-and-architectural-history/) for the evaluation of such digital scholarship. While the document – which was written by a task force including some of the best practitioners of DH projects in the field – does well to acknowledge the different levels of contribution and access that should go into account, the bias is clearly towards “big data” projects, ones that harvest and digest large quantities historical information. Computational criticism, therefore, seems to be at the top of the dh pecking order.

Projects so large cannot be not the task of the author alone. Writing, that solitary calling of the scholar, now cedes time to strategy meetings, design critiques, real-time editing sessions. Make no mistake: this constitutes a significant change in the way scholarship is formed, along with the ideologies that produce it. On the face of it, such change threatens the clarity of voice that can come through a single author text. But it is also a potential boon for publishing in the humanities; by moving towards the multi-author model that defines the sciences, humanities scholars can now share the success for (and weather the critique of) their publications. In a time of perish or publish, acknowledging this kind of work could spread the wealth in a way that sustains scholars in the various centers, institutes, and interdisciplinary degree programs that have cropped up across humanities disciplines in recent years (if we think those should endure).

That such “centers” – like our own Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis – live and die on gifts from private donors and foundations leads to the third and final point: whom do digital humanities projects serve? Support for the CAA + SAH guidelines mentioned above came from the Mellon Foundation, which looks most favorably on elite institutions and the societies and associations of specific fields. Is the goal of incubating and assessing digital projects primarily to create standards within the academy, which operates within what one might call specific intellectual aesthetics? Or do digital humanities projects, with the decline of the public intellectual, represent a hope for bridging an increasingly attacked ivory tower and the broader population? A current series of interviews from the [Los Angeles Review of Books](https://lareviewofbooks.org/interview/the-digital-in-the-humanities-an-interview-with-franco-moretti/) poses this as a central question. These projects would seem a powerful way for the public to interact with humanities research in an exploratory and enlightening way. The language of new media speaks with visual representations of data, and it seems right that the humanities – at least some portion of them – should enter that conversation. As a recent [opinion piece from the London School of Economics](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/04/09/academic-promotion-scholars-popular-media/) argues, a scholar’s ideas in popular media has significant bearing on their contributions to the academy as well.

In what proportion and under what title the humanities should fuse with the digital is the subject of our ongoing debate. As Franco Moretti, The Danily C. and Laura Louise Bell Professor in the Humanities at Stanford and the founder of university’s pioneering Literary Lab, put it in the first of the aforementioned interviews, “’digital humanities’ means nothing.” While Moretti was pointing to the dizzying proliferation of tools and approaches to digital work in the humanities, hopefully with new standards for goals and best practices, we’ll soon know a bit more about what the digital humanities can mean.