# Debates in the Digital Humanities

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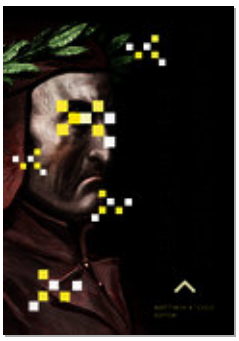

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## The Social Contract of Scholarly Publishing

DANIEL J. COHEN

When Roy Rosenzweig and I finished writing a full draft of our book *Digital History*, we sat down at a table and looked at the stack of printouts.

"So, what now?" I said to Roy naively. "Couldn't we just publish what we have on the web with the click of a button? What value does the gap between this stack and the finished product have? Isn't it 95 percent done? What's the last five percent for?"

We stared at the stack some more.

Roy finally broke the silence, explaining the magic of the last stage of scholarly production between the final draft and the published book: "What happens now is the creation of the *social contract* between the authors and the readers. We agree to spend considerable time ridding the manuscript of minor errors, and the press spends additional time on other corrections and layout, and readers respond to these signals—a lack of typos, nicely formatted footnotes, a bibliography, specialized fonts, and a high-quality physical presentation—by agreeing to give the book a serious read."

I have frequently replayed that conversation in my mind, wondering about the constitution of this social contract in scholarly publishing, which is deeply related to questions of academic value and reward.

For the ease of conversation, let's call the two sides of the social contract of scholarly publishing the *supply side* and the *demand side*. The supply side is the creation of scholarly works, including writing, peer review, editing, and the form of publication. The demand side is much more elusive—the mental state of the audience that leads them to "buy" what the supply side has produced. In order for the social contract to work, for engaged reading to happen, and for credit to be given to the author (or editor of a scholarly collection), both sides need to be aligned properly.

The social contract of the book is profoundly entrenched and powerful—almost mythological—especially in the humanities. As John Updike put it in his diatribe against the digital[1] (and most humanities scholars and tenure committees would still agree), "The printed, bound and paid-for book was—still is, for the