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Hacking the Academy

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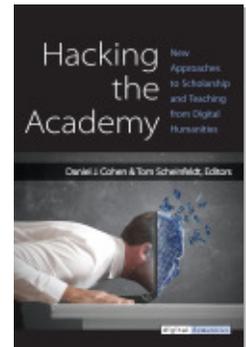
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Voices

SHARING ONE'S RESEARCH

Chad Black and Mark Sample

There is a long history of scholars turning their papers over to libraries at the end of their careers. These collections are important for the two sides of historical research and publication that they represent. They provide a window into academic processes, but also access to sometimes quirky, sometimes exhaustive, primary sources, representing years of intentional collection. There is intrinsic value to such collections for both historical education and historical practice. What is more, the technologies of the web have revolutionized the potential of collections in the everyday moments of their original production. Rather than putting research processes and materials behind the veils of time, space, and limited access, we now have the possibility to construct and curate our research materials and process archives—what I call the “Papers of You,” in real time, and make it immediately available to those without the resources to gain access to our eclectic collections. How would this application of technology to the small corner of disciplinary history revolutionize its part of the academy? First, making the research process transparent would open to the world the mystical reality of what it is academic historians do with their time. Additionally, making research processes and materials available would demonstrate a commitment to the scholarly values of exchange, integrity, and open access that represent the better parts of academics’ nature. Distributed self-generated collections of archival material will also enhance access—particularly to resources from countries without the resources to do it all themselves. Finally, it would keep researchers honest.

—CHAD BLACK

We in the humanities are accustomed to being very secretive about our research. Sure, we go to conferences and share not-yet-published work. But these conference papers—even if they're finished the morning of the presentation with penciled-in edits—they're still addressed to an audience, meant to be shared. Are we really that ridiculous and self-important? Let's face it, I'm an English professor—it's not as if I'm working on the Manhattan Project. Imagine publishing just your research notes, shorn of context or rhetoric or (especially or) the sense of a conclusion we like to build into our papers. Imagine sharing only your works cited. Or, imagine sharing the loosest, most chaotic collection of sources, expanded far beyond the shallows of Works Cited, past the nebulous Works Consulted, deep into the fathomless Works Out There. I think that what we do—striving to understand human experience in a chaotic world—is so crucial that we need to share what we learn, every step along the way. Only then do all the lonely hours we spend tracing sources, reading, and writing make sense.

—MARK SAMPLE