



Comments from Paula Petrik

I'm not exactly clear on all the particulars encapsulated in the emails, but I think that I have enough of a handle to make some useful observations. You might have to edit whatever you forward to the council or planning group because I was dismayed by some of the suggestions and may have come across as a bit harsh. Many of John's ideas might have been good a decade ago but are passe now and, moreover, demonstrate a real misunderstanding of how the digital world and its digital economy have evolved. I think if the WHA really wants to move more fully to the web, everyone is going to need to saddle up and become more familiar with the digital world. On another note, the multi-journal, rotating plan really sounds hopelessly complex and looks like an organizational and financial nightmare. Who would do all of this?

1. The WHA should NOT get in the digital publishing business for a number reasons.

First, even a minimal publishing group would cost money and entail staff time. I do not agree at all with the premise that there is very little cost involved. This position that has been disproved over and over and, yet, it still maintains its zombie existence. Second, digital publishing is much more than digitizing a publication, popping it into PDF format, and putting it on the web. To be useful, the publication has to be encoded properly; someone needs to add metadata; and there needs to be some sort of search engine so that folks can find stuff once the collection grows in size.

2. The WHA does NOT need to reinvent the wheel.

There are platforms that have developed over the last decade that are much more adept at online publishing than the WHA can ever hope to be. JSTOR and Project Muse are two such examples. Why not enter into an agreement with JSTOR, for example, that would allow WHA members access to a basket of western state journals for a small fee rolled into the membership cost? At the moment, Oregon, Nebraska, California, and a couple of journals are part of the JSTOR Current Scholarship Collection, a collection of recent issues. Montana is part of JSTOR, EBSCO, and ProQuest that includes the entire run of Montana with a moving wall. (I suspect that Montana will also move into the Current Scholarship Collection shortly.) No muss, no fuss.

3. The central problem for the WHA is that few western history journals are online.

The WHA MIGHT help state journals go digital by providing expertise and, perhaps, a modest subsidy to become part of JSTOR Current Scholarship or other database. How, for example, in a time of deep state budget and staff cuts does a journal raise the money to have back issues digitized to spec so that older numbers can be made available online? What are a journal's online options? Can a state journal abandon the print edition in light of the fact that the online offering is based on the print version? (We actually do have the answers to some of these questions.) What the WHA CANNOT do is the work of turning the

publication into digital format. If the journal wants to be included, it has to do the digital work to spec and/or join a database with whom the WHA has a relationship.

4. While many of the other suggestions are interesting (online Journal of Comparative West, partnerships with presses, concatenation of teaching materials, translations, other resources), the WHA must scrutinize them carefully with an eye to their feasibility.

First, a publication committee is, therefore, a good idea. Second, the publications committee must consist of editors, scholars, K-12 teachers, historical society and park folks at least some of whom have a clue about digital publishing/humanities. Third, the committee should always ask three initial questions: 1) Do the prospective projects duplicate already existing efforts? 2) What are the project's specific requirements in terms of personnel and money? and 3) What is the purpose of the project in terms of content and audience? The days of the amateur website carried on by the odd graduate student are long gone. Website construction and maintenance is not a volunteer activity. An online journal is especially time-consuming and costly. Just ask the folks at *Common-Place*.

I should also add that many of these suggestions have already been realized and are currently available. Adam Matthew, a British firm, has already digitized the western history plums from the Newberry. The database costs \$40,000, and the Newberry gets a cut of every sale. Imagine Adam Matthew's upfront investment in terms of permissions, copyright clearance, digitization, color correction. I just don't think that the WHA has that kind of money. Gilder-Lehrman, NEH's Edsitement, the LOC, and the National Archives have lesson plans and primary sources as do many state historical societies. One feasible project might be to concatenate all these resources and update offerings much as Cathy Lavender did in the late '90s and add the results to the WHA site for one stop shopping.

I think that the WHA might want to initiate some smaller, realizable projects before tackling an online journal and so forth; it should also ask itself what it can do that would be different from what is already being done and what projects would be more sophisticated than Web 1.0. Let me repeat: going digital is not free. The same production costs apply to both digital and print publications. Despite the foregoing, I want to encourage the WHA to do digital stuff; I just don't want the organization be naive about its digital plans.

5. Finally, I think that, if the WHA seeks to participate in digital publishing of some kind, it should pull together funding for a digital award. All the WHA prizes recognize traditional forms of publication. Why should anyone volunteer to participate in any of the WHA initiatives if the the organization does not appear to value or applaud the work? By the same token, the WHA might encourage digital work among graduate and undergraduates in much the same fashion that NACIS <<http://www.nacis.org>> does.

Hope that this helps,
Paula