

The History E-Book Project

The Project

The American Council of Learned Societies has received a \$3-million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to sponsor an electronic publishing initiative for works of high quality in the field of history: the History E-Book Project. During the first five years of this project (1999–2004), ACLS will collaborate with five Learned Societies and a select group of University Presses to publish these e-books, exploring the intellectual possibilities of new technologies and helping to assure the continued viability of history writing in today's publishing environment.

The Goals

The History E-Book Project has several major goals:

- Encourage historians to discuss, plan, and write electronic books.
- Encourage more scholarly presses to experiment with, to consider the issues involved in, and to develop in-house expertise for, electronic publishing.
- Streamline production processes and reduce costs.
- Develop an infrastructure that considers the importance of archiving scholarly texts for the long term.
- Ensure that the recent emergence of large commercial e-publishers/distributors does not take undue control of the intellectual assets of the scholarly community.
- Work closely with scholarly journals and learned societies to insure that historical works in electronic format are reviewed and promoted properly for the scholarly community.
- Encourage libraries to purchase and make widely available historical works of high quality within their emerging electronic collections.
- Actively encourage the acceptance of electronic books within the historical profession for the purposes of hiring, tenure, promotion, and related professional concerns.

What Are E-Books?

An e-book is a text- or text-and-image-based publication in digital, i.e., computer-generated, presented, and readable form. In general terms, e-books, in whatever form, differ from traditional print books in many ways. Among these are:

- the reader accesses and views text, images, charts, maps, tables, indexes on the computer screen
- the text, citations, and any captions for images, tables, charts, maps, etc. are searchable
- various sections of the publication (chapters, subsections, indexes, supporting materials) can be accessed in many different sequences by electronic "hyperlinks," thus allowing for great flexibility in access of primary sources, narrative structure, and analytical apparatus
- e-books and entire e-book libraries can be linked to one another, to other web sites, and to digital archives to deepen and broaden scholarly research.

The Titles

The ACLS History E-Book Project plans over its initial phase to convert to electronic format 500 backlist titles of major importance to historical studies — books that remain vital to both scholars and advanced students, are frequently cited in the literature, and currently may not be widely available — and to publish 85 completely new electronic works that use new technologies to communicate the results of scholarship in new ways. The aim is to create electronic books of unquestioned quality, subject to the rigorous review process currently used in the selection of print works. In cooperation with ACLS, the university presses will seek to identify, recruit, and solicit proposals from professional historians.

Once a title has been selected, each participating press will then work with the author and the History E-Book Project Center to develop a text for electronic publication according to the standards and formats established by the project. These works, which may also have a print component, will be published on the web site of the ACLS History E-Book Project, which in its first phase will be accessible to students and scholars through their libraries.

Backlist

In addition, the authors of new electronic history books will be asked to recommend already-published titles that have framed the conceptual and factual background of their own works. The History E-Book Project will make every effort not only to include these within the backlist for the project, but will also facilitate the processes by which they can be actively hyperlinked to the newly-created titles through electronic footnotes, bibliography, and in the body of critical/conceptual discussions. Thus the frontlist/backlist will form essential “clusters” of related titles; and as the project progresses and more new titles within a given field are accepted for electronic publication, these electronic clusters will begin to overlap and to cross-fertilize in new and exciting ways for both authors and readers.

In addition, the History E-Book Project will include the important reviews of these backlist titles, either in full text or through links to other sites, to expand the context of the discussion for each title or cluster of titles.

The Learned Societies

Five learned societies of the ACLS form the initial working group for the History E-Book Project:

- American Historical Association
- Middle East Studies Association
- Organization of American Historians
- Renaissance Society of America
- Society for the History of Technology

The Presses

Ten university presses are currently developing new titles for the ACLS History E-Book Project:

- University of California Press
- Columbia University Press
- Harvard University Press
- Johns Hopkins University Press
- The MIT Press
- University of Michigan Press
- New York University Press
- University of North Carolina Press
- Oxford University Press
- Rutgers University Press

The Authors

The primary goal of the History E-Book Project is to encourage historians to think in new terms about the creation and publication of historical works. It invites reconsideration of the traditional relationship between primary-source materials and the role of the historian in gathering, assessing, and interpreting these materials for the scholarly community.

With the advent of electronic publishing in all forms — CD-ROM, Open eBook, and the World Wide Web — historians are now free to begin thinking in new terms about ways in which to analyze and present their historical findings to the reader. The History E-Book Project therefore

invites prospective authors to consider the wide range of possibilities for multiple narratives and the deeper and more varied presentation of primary sources and their interpretation that the new electronic media may provide. The aim of this project is to harness technology's ability to provide scholars with these new and innovative ways of using and presenting historical material in cogent and compelling works of history writing.

What types of titles are most appropriate for the ACLS list? The historian could consider any treatment of a historical topic, applying any organizational approach — from the traditional interpretive text with footnotes, bibliography, and other hyperlinked apparatus to more innovative formats of interactive electronic projects, including hyperlinked images, charts, maps, slide shows, and in rare cases other materials, such as video and extended sound recording.

Because this project does not encourage the simple digitization of the traditional print monograph, however, the criteria for the author's selection of electronic formats should be closely related to the nature of his or her project and not simply introduce "bells and whistles" to an otherwise traditional approach merely for the sake of moving a project into electronic form.

The challenge is to include electronic capabilities in ways that go beyond the merely illustrative and include varying degrees of reader access to wider and deeper sources of information. These capabilities put at the disposal of the author unprecedented possibilities for conveying the rich variety of the historical periods, forces, and personalities under study that the print format can only approximate.

Information

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