

[Multimodal Digital Monographs: An Interview with Allison Levy and Sarah McKee](#)

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Guest post from [Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications](#).

In this interview, Emory University's Sarah McKee and Brown University's Allison Levy share insights from their work publishing digital multimedia scholarship.

Feeding the Elephant: In your recent white paper, [Multimodal Digital Monographs: Content, Collaboration, Community](#) (June 2022), you note that digital publications are modeling new partnerships between universities and university presses that can strengthen humanities infrastructure and encourage innovation. Can you give a couple of examples of how that works in practice?

ALLISON LEVY: Cross-institutional collaboration—bringing together distinctive university and university press capabilities for common ends in the service of public understanding and access—is pushing the boundaries of scholarly publishing in new and necessary ways. Within the digital publishing ecosystem, numerous mission-driven resource sharing models have emerged based on program organization and individual project needs. [Brown University Digital Publications](#), launched with support from the Mellon Foundation in 2015, has developed a novel university-based approach to content development with a focus on enhanced born-digital monographs. Brown University faculty are selected for this opportunity via a competitive annual process overseen by a digital publications advisory board. The selected authors receive robust editorial, design, and technological support over the full lifecycle of the project. We look to publishers to handle peer review, copy editing, and marketing.

To date, Brown has partnered with the University of Virginia Press ([Furnace and Fugue: A Digital Edition of Michael Maier's Atalanta Fugiens \(1618\) with Scholarly Commentary](#)), Stanford University Press ([Shadow Plays: Virtual Realities in an Analog World](#)), and MIT Press ([A New Vision for Islamic Pasts and Futures](#)). Experimentation with new scholarly forms and dissemination models is yielding exciting results. Brown's first landmark publication, Furnace & Fugue, has attracted more than 16,000 unique visitors from over 168 countries since its publication two years ago (the print run would have been 500 copies). The book has been awarded the American Historical Association's 2022 Roy Rosenzweig Prize for Creativity in Digital History. (For more on Furnace and Fugue, see the [Elephant's post](#) on it last year.)

SARAH MCKEE: At Emory the [Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem](#) (TOME) initiative offers a wonderful opportunity for collaborations among various campus units and the university presses that publish our faculty's work. From my position within the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry, I spread the word about TOME and help faculty better understand open access and digital options. I also help to promote the published books through public events and social media. The dean's office provides

the subvention funding with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; the Scholarly Communications Office of Emory Libraries guides our contract conversations; and the Emory Center for Digital Scholarship (ECDS) develops and supports enhanced digital editions. While most of our [TOME publications](#) are straightforward e-book editions, distributed as PDFs or EPUBs, we were delighted to collaborate with the University of North Carolina Press on an enhanced edition of the book *Hajj to the Heart: Sufi Journeys across the Indian Ocean* (2021), by Scott Kugle, Professor of Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies. Working closely with Scott's editor, Elaine Maisner, and the UNC Press production team, ECDS developed and now hosts the enhanced edition, which includes more than thirty additional color images, three videos with commentary, and three appendixes of archival material never before translated into English, on the Manifold platform.

FtE: You note that Emory and Brown have developed distinct programs for supporting digital multimedia projects. What are the key differences, and how do they shape the kinds of projects each program produces?

SM: Emory's [Digital Publishing in the Humanities](#) (DPH), supported by the Mellon Foundation, offers multiple paths for authors to engage with digital publishing. We focus exclusively on monographs, defined here as works that offer a long-form scholarly argument. Authors might apply for a TOME subvention to publish a conventional monograph as an open access e-book. Or they might ask their publishers to collaborate with the Emory Center for Digital Scholarship on an enhanced edition, like *Hajj to the Heart*. Several authors are also developing prototypes for completely born-digital monographs. The [Digital Monograph Writers Workshop](#) helps faculty participants determine the scope for their projects and begin to develop them, ideally in collaboration with a publisher. Our campus partners provide additional in-kind support, and several of our authors have secured outside funding and/or brought students into their projects. But relying on in-kind support or student contributors—which can present incredible opportunities for collaboration and learning—can also dramatically slow the pace of a project. Making decisions about how to pursue digital publication depends very much on the needs of the individual project and on the authors' priorities. Do they need to publish on a particular timeline for tenure or promotion? Or is developing an interactive digital presentation more important for articulating the scholarly argument? Many considerations shape each project supported by the program.

AL: Brown University Digital Publications, a collaboration between the University Library and the Dean of the Faculty, promotes innovative faculty scholarship by catalyzing both the practice and academic recognition of new scholarly forms. Our projects take full advantage of the digital environment to present research and advance arguments in ways not achievable in a conventional book, whether through multimedia enhancements or interactive navigation systems. Our portfolio is growing, with more faculty every year—from every career stage—choosing to pursue born-digital publication. In addition to the three publications mentioned above, nine other works are currently in development and represent a broad disciplinary range: Africana studies, American studies, archaeology and the ancient world, ethnic studies, history, history of art and architecture, Italian studies, literary arts, and performance studies.

We're also now reaching beyond our own campus to help other scholars do this work. This summer we hosted an [NEH-funded institute](#) for faculty from less well-resourced institutions—excellent scholars with fantastic project ideas but a lot less opportunity and support to fully realize them. Training has

always been a hallmark of Brown's program, which provides opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to interface with faculty authors, digital humanities librarians, digital technologists, and designers. We've also established a Diversity in Digital Publishing postdoctoral fellowship.

FtE: Thus far the publication of digital multimedia scholarship has been largely a bespoke, grant-supported enterprise. How can this mode of publishing be made more broadly accessible and affordable?

AL: The Mellon Foundation's Digital Monograph Initiative, launched in 2014, has made much of this experimentation with new scholarly forms possible. As viable models begin to emerge, universities and university presses are considering next steps. At Brown, our initial goals focused on learning what it would take to support the development of enhanced born-digital monographs with the quality and complexity appropriate to the authors' ideas. Mellon funding allowed for the hire of an in-house editor and a designer (since regularized in the library's budget) as well as the services of outside vendors. As we proceeded, the emergence of new open-source platforms expanded our ability to satisfy a wider range of project needs and types, such as the multi-volume [Race & in America](#) or the [student edition of Brown's landmark Slavery and Justice Report](#) (both developed using Manifold). By introducing a less bespoke approach to interactive design and development, we are able to balance costs across the publication portfolio while continuing to innovate. Yet sustainability of the larger digital publishing enterprise means opening up this activity beyond a handful of institutions. A key objective of the white paper is to promote greater inclusion and equitable access of diverse voices as the development, validation, and dissemination of multimodal digital monographs continues to unfold.

SM: The creation of new funding streams that give authors more robust and reliable options is certainly a critical need. But funding alone doesn't solve the problems of greater accessibility and affordability. Digital projects also need community guidance and support. We are very lucky to have available within the scholarly publishing community several open-source platforms—[Fulcrum](#), [Manifold](#), [Quire](#), [PubPub](#), [Scalar](#)—that can manage different types of digital book presentations. Bringing in developer expertise can further expand and customize the capabilities of any platform without starting from scratch. So active collaborations that bring together resources—especially human expertise—from authors' home institutions and publishers strike me as a great untapped possibility. Publishing workflows are often quite stable and fixed, but a willingness to experiment together can yield meaningful outcomes, as demonstrated by the eight projects showcased in our white paper. Presses certainly cannot and should not shoulder the entire expense of multimodal publication, but some investment of time and professional development for staff—on both the press and home institution sides—could go a very long way toward opening up opportunities for more authors.

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FtE: Your white paper draws a strong connection between digital humanities and publicly engaged humanities. Is there a tension between initiatives to develop digital “monographs” and multimedia “scholarship,” and efforts to reach broader audiences? Do the affordances of digital multimedia offer ways to overcome the longstanding separation of specialist from non-specialist writing?

SM: I don’t see a tension per se, but I do think that significant effort is required to connect those dots. Open digital monographs have tremendous potential to reach wider audiences by presenting content in multiple ways and allowing for interactive engagement, which is not easy to do in a printed book. But authors still need to know whom they hope to reach—putting a book online does not necessarily guarantee that audiences will find and engage with it. Monograph authors typically know their specialist audiences well, and they understand the expectations of that community. The picture becomes a bit murkier when interdisciplinary or non-academic audiences come into play. So being able to imagine who might benefit from—or even contribute to—the scholarly argument is a key part of the process for authors who are serious about reaching wider audiences. At Emory we help authors to explore these questions through our [Digital Monograph Writers Workshop](#), and we also offer opportunities for public and interdisciplinary conversation through events at the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry. But this integral part of the writing process is always a challenge and is not necessarily easier for digital projects. The potential rewards include overcoming that “longstanding separation” and offering a vivid demonstration of the humanities’ true value by meeting more people where they are—which is largely in the digital environment.

AL: Thanks to open access publishing models, reimagined scholarly forms are increasing the visibility and reach of humanities scholarship to audiences both within and beyond the academy in unprecedented ways. Just as exciting—and imperative, I’d argue, if we are to truly diversify the authorship and readership of scholarly work—is audience engagement. To cite one example, Brown and MIT Press recently announced [On Seeing](#), a print and digital series that will center underrepresented voices and perspectives and promote visual literacy for multiple publics. Brown will produce the digital editions (to be developed using PubPub), which will also include a community engagement program tailored to each specific volume. Resources might include an online hub for knowledge-sharing, a downloadable community conversation toolkit, an author interview or podcast, or free-to-the-public events such as book readings and structured conversations in libraries, bookstores, or public arts institutions. Thus, the digital editions will foster public understanding and participation.

FtE: Where can readers learn more about digital publication?

SM AND AL: We can recommend several starting points to learn more about digital publishing. One is a web series called [Adventures in Digital Publishing: Collaborations and Conversations](#) that we co-founded in 2021 with the Digital Publishing and Library Relations committees of AUPresses. Each episode features a conversation with the author and publishing team behind the production of a digital publication, and recordings of the first two episodes are available on the series website. AUPresses also offers some wonderful resources on its [Ask UP: Digital Publishing](#) web page. In summer 2022 Brown University hosted an NEH Institute on Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities—[Born-Digital Scholarly Publishing: Resources and Roadmaps](#)—and the accompanying

website offers recordings of the presentations by a slate of faculty that includes scholars, digital scholarship experts, and academic publishing professionals. The websites for the [Brown University Digital Publications](#) and [Emory's Digital Publishing in the Humanities](#) also showcase the projects we've supported with funding from the Mellon Foundation and give more information about our respective programs.

Allison Levy is Director of Brown University Digital Publications. You can follow her on Twitter @AllisonMLevy and @brown_cds.

Sarah McKee administers the Digital Publishing in the Humanities program at Emory University. You can follow the program on Twitter @EmoryDPH.

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