

## [Democratizing the American History Textbook: Mass Collaboration and The American Yawp](#)

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**Chair:** Kathryn Tomasek

**Panelists:** Ben Wright, Joseph Locke, Margo Irvin, and Angela Esco Elder

In 2006, Roy Rosenzweig published an article in the *Journal of American History* entitled “Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past.” By then Wikipedia had already become, he said, “perhaps the largest work of online historical writing, the most widely read work of digital history, and the most important free historical resource on the World Wide Web.” But Wikipedia’s anarchic editing process and uneven reliability have long repelled academics. Despite studies—including Rosenzweig’s—comparing it favorably to traditional encyclopedias, it’s still the sour taste of “Wikipedia” that spoils much discussion of “open source” history, particularly outside of the digital humanities. But Rosenzweig believed that “if historians believe that what is available free on the Web is low quality, then we have a responsibility to make better information sources available online.” Historians could endlessly indict Wikipedia for its many shortcomings, or, he said, we could “emulate [its] great democratic triumph ... its demonstration that people are eager for free and accessible information resources.”

In 2014, after a year-long collaboration, over 350 historians produced a first edition of *The American Yawp* ([www.americanyawp.com](http://www.americanyawp.com)), a free and online, collaboratively built, open-source American history textbook designed for college-level history courses. Launched as a radical experiment in mass collaboration and institution-free pedagogy—a growing and widely successful experiment that 150,000 users already benefit from each semester—the Yawp was only a logical extension of the democratic promise inherent not just in the rise of the Digital Humanities as an identifiable academic field, but in a moment when technological innovation, institutional resources, professional norms, and shifting scholarly attitudes have converged to prove Rosenzweig right: history can be open source.

The editors of *The American Yawp* are joined by contributor and chapter editor Angela Esco Elder and Stanford University Press acquisitions editor Margo Irvin (SUP is partnering with the Yawp to explore new paths for the publication of open texts) to discuss the promise and perils of mass collaboration in democratizing the American history survey. How can scholars collaborate across institutions to build resources for the classroom? How is open-source licensing changing historical pedagogy? And in a connected, digital age, what is the future of the American history textbook? How, for instance, are publishers reacting to new technology? Digital humanities scholar Kathryn Tomasek will therefore guide a discussion that addresses these questions while exploring the nature of the American history survey, the collaborative potential of the digital humanities, and the role of university presses in balancing a democratized history with the maintenance of the highest standards of the discipline.

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*Full Session*

## [democratizingtheamericanhistoryfullsession.mp3](#)

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