

# 15 “The mutt historian”

## The perils and opportunities of doing history of science on-line

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Historians of contemporary science face a profound and unprecedented problem: the sheer volume of information and the difficulty of coping with the esoteric technicalities within each scientific specialization.<sup>1</sup> Recent science is a huge and very diverse terrain. The number of practicing scientists is vast; the number of research fields is greater than at any previous time in history, and the number of potential sources for recent developments is enormous.<sup>2</sup> For historians, the task is daunting.

A three-year project running from 2000 to 2003—based at the Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology and funded jointly by the Dibner Fund and Sloan Foundation—explored this problem.<sup>3</sup> It was entitled the History of Recent Science and Technology on the Web (HRST). One important prong of the project was to investigate the opportunities provided by electronic data storage and communication, because this medium has obvious advantages over printed text with regard to accessibility and searchability. Another important prong was to foster a collaborative network of geographically dispersed scientists and historians, using a website as the meeting ground and archive.

There were five sub-projects within HRST: Apollo Guidance Computer, Bioinformatics, Materials Research, Perspectives on Molecular Evolution, and Physics of Scale. I participated in the Materials Research sub-project with the historically minded philosopher Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent and the scientist Hervé Arribart. Over the course of three years we interviewed several dozen scientists and engineers, designed a website, wrote histories on institutions, instrumentation, specific materials, disciplinary boundaries, and funding. We also scanned in texts and materials to create archives and encouraged the direct participation on the website in the writing of the history, including criticism of our designs and texts.

In this chapter I describe the project in greater detail and draw some lessons learned from the experience. I begin by addressing a recent contribution in the *American Historical Review* about the potential for the digital medium to upset the apple cart of historical practice in general. One of the main issues is the tremendous promise of space saving, accessibility, and searchability—set against the ominous threat of technical obsolescence and with it the loss of historical data. I argue that while the permanence and reliability of the digital medium is being problematized, that of paper is taken for granted. We need to remind ourselves of the infrastructure that currently props up paper records in order to understand the promise of electronic