

Data Management: A mandated opportunity

All NSF grants must contain a data management component. This session will explore what that mandate means and the larger issues of data management for historians. For most of us, this is a strange, new world NSF is forcing us to enter. And force is the correct term: No data management plan, no grant. As the engineering, scientific and medical communities explore making their data accessible as a condition of receiving funding or publishing in some journals, we can expect this mandate to expand.

Historians are much better trained to deal with drawing lessons from the past to critique speculative futures, as opposed to coming up with speculative futures of their own. Yet as historians of technology, we should start thinking about the kinds of data world we might want to live in, and what kinds of shared tools and community norms we might need to make that world a reality. Because this discussion is still young, this panel has the opportunity to shape data management for our profession.

One issue is what constitutes data for historians of technology. It's not a final product, but is it just a bibliography or something more, like sources and notes? Because that definition is still very fluid, this panel provides an opportunity to develop a useful answer to that question. If the answer is just bibliographic "data," that is relatively easy to comply with but does not get us much as a community.

That answer has potentially high stakes and big benefits. In an age of open-source publishing and electronic archives, what responsibility do we have to preserve our data for others, especially for publicly funded research? What opportunities does data management offer our community of scholars?

Historians tend to focus on interpretation and argument in creating narrative, archival history. Thinking of primary sources as data and our research notes as creating data sound odd, but they accurately describe what we use.

Once we decide what data is, what do we do with it? A non-problem is not sharing data. NSF can make allowances for not sharing (e.g., copyright, archival permissions, ongoing and future projects). More challenging questions involve how do we preserve our data in ways that enhance its value to the larger historical community.