

## Keywords for a Digital Profession

### Obsolescence

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It's wholly appropriate that I've been asked to speak to the word "obsolescence," as it's a concept that my work keeps returning to, but each of my uses of the term contains evasions and reversals that require some consideration. First, my book, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television*, published last year, focuses not on whether the novel is or isn't becoming obsolete, but rather on what the cultural and political stakes of claiming such obsolescence for the form might be, arguing that claims of obsolescence often look not to the future but to the past, carrying with them a nostalgic (and often regressive) desire to re-centralize that which has seemingly been displaced. Second, my blog, which I've maintained for five and a half years now, was named "Planned Obsolescence" as a tongue-in-cheek jab at the fact that I'd just finished what seemed to be a long-term, durable project (the book), and was left with the detritus of many smaller ideas that seemed destined to fade away into nothingness, with each post scrolling down the front page and off into the archives -- and yet, the apparent ephemerality of the blog post masks within it a surprising persistence, thanks both to the technologies of searching, filtering, and archiving that have developed across the web, as well as to the network of blog conversations that keep the archives in play. And third, the difficulties that I encountered while trying to get the book published -- as I found myself shopping the manuscript around at precisely the moment when many university presses were facing huge post-dot-com-bust budget cuts -- led me to question whether the current system of academic publishing was itself obsolete, and how we might fashion a new system to carry the profession into a digital future. My work with MediaCommons, however, has itself encountered a further range of difficulties that now lead me to agree with scholars such as Lisa Gitelman who suggest that obsolete technologies -- and obsolete social and institutional structures -- have curious and surprisingly vibrant afterlives, haunting us long after their times would seem to have passed. This presentation will explore all of these obsolescences, as well as the more ghostly persistences that accompany them.