Reviews of Digital Resources

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Abstract   Research findings in the humanities are traditionally discussed, evaluated, and categorized in reviews of text publications. However, due to the digital transformation of society and science, many other digital forms of research results are emerging, such as digital editions, data collections, and tools, which have rarely been reviewed. In the Digital Humanities, there are several initiatives for reviewing digital resources with the aim of including them in the academic discourse in the same way as text publications and thus helping to harmonize academic evaluation systems with the practice of digital work.*

Keywords   Reviews, Evaluation, Digital Editions, Digital Text Collections, Tools

Reviews are an established form of discussing, evaluating, and classifying research results, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Traditionally, reviews have several functions. For one, they provide information about new publications and give an overview of the content, making it easier for readers to get started and gain an overview of a topic. Moreover, by providing their own critical opinion on the subject under review, review authors examine the publication's academic quality. In addition, the reviewed text is further contextualized, i.e., situated within the larger subject area and academic discourse. Academic reviews are usually short and appear in specialist journals or in dedicated review journals.[1] The reviewed works are typically printed products, such as academic monographs, anthologies, or articles, as well as printed editions or encyclopedias.

What is the situation regarding the review of digital resources? Digital resources have long been established, as well, to make research results accessible. In addition to digitally published monographs or articles, digital resources include digital scientific volumes and archives, digital corpora, websites on which research results are presented, sets of research data, software developed in a scientific context, databases, and virtual research environments, as well as multimedia forms of publication

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* This chapter, including quotations in foreign languages, was translated from German by Brandon Watson.
1 In Henny (2018), a sample of 3,000 reviews was taken from the International Bibliography of Reviews of Literature in the Humanities and Social Sciences (IBR-Online). The mean values of three to four pages were then determined.

such as blog posts or podcasts. This chapter focuses on digital resources that are not analogous forms of printed publications simply created through digitization and, conversely, could not be printed without further work.[2] Their value and importance for academic discourse and knowledge acquisition is undeniable, not only in the Digital Humanities, but also in the humanities in general, as well as other disciplines.

In the age of digital transformation, the research process is fundamentally changing: objects to be researched are being digitized or created directly in digital form, academic communication is taking place primarily in digital and networked form, and research methods are evolving. These changes to the research process are accompanied by a fundamental change in the culture of scientific publication and reception.[3] As a result, the evaluation systems are also undergoing a process of change and adaptation.

This chapter first examines the extent to which the forms of scientific assessment, evaluation, and review have already adapted to the different types of digital research results. The focus is deliberately broader in terms of the contexts and forms of evaluation, while not being limited to reviews, as fundamental questions of evaluating digital research affect all forms of evaluation. The chapter then presents existing initiatives for reviewing digital resources in the Digital Humanities. Finally, the article concludes with an assessment of the importance of reviews of digital research resources and an outlook on their potential for further development.

1.   On the Status of Evaluating Digital Research Results

Reflection and debate about the evaluation of digital scholarship began with the onset of the Digital Humanities. Nyhan (2020, 167–176) traces these movements back to the 1960s, when the field was still known as Humanities Computing. However, the idea did not gain traction until the early 2000s, when a series of recommendations were published on how digital research can and should be evaluated, including the "Guidelines for Evaluating Work in Digital Humanities and Digital Media" (*Modern Language Association* 2012), which were first adopted by the MLA in 2000. Since then, numerous handouts and catalogs of criteria for evaluating the results of digital scholarship have been published, ranging from general recommendations for the Digital Humanities as a whole to criteria for certain types of resources (such as scholarly digital editions) and suggestions for specific subject areas and disciplines (most re-

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2   One promising area of research is whether more data-oriented scholarly output has been reviewed less or differently than narrative or reporting text forms, i.e., to what extent critical text editions, dictionaries, encyclopedias, catalogs, illustrated volumes, index volumes, or atlases have been reviewed differently than research articles or scholarly monographs, even in print.

3   Jannidis (2023, 1–13) describes these processes of change in digital literature studies.

cently, the "Handreichung zur Rezension von Forschungssoftware in der Archäologie und den Altertumswissenschaften" by Homburg et al. 2020).[4] In addition to recommendations, criteria, and guidelines, there is also research literature explicitly devoted to the topic of evaluating digital research and its results. Two volumes from the 2010s should be mentioned: a section of the journal *Profession* entitled *Evaluating Digital Scholarship* (Schreibman, et al. 2011) and an entire issue of the *Journal of Digital Humanities,* which is introduced by the editors under the title *Closing the Evaluation Gap* (Cohen & Troyano 2012). The series of recommendations and research on the topic of evaluating digital research expresses the need for close attention to the topic. There have been serious points for discussion and clarification, not to mention a concern to provide practical assistance through handouts and to make recommendations for researchers, reviewers, and decision-makers. Current publications and academic events indicate the need for further research on the subject.[5]

Research results in the digital age are undoubtedly no longer only published in the form of traditional text and image publications. Publishing research data and research software is strongly recommended and demanded by funding institutions.[6] The overall awareness of the importance of the sustainable publication of datasets has increased since the formulation of the FAIR principles ("findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable," Wilkinson et al. (2016), see also the chapter by J. Apel in this volume, pp. 395–396), which are aimed at increasing the reusability and sustainability of research data, especially for machine processing. Nevertheless, what are the challenges?

The report of the European Association of Academies on the sustainable sharing of data in the humanities emphasizes, for example, that an effort by all involved in the research sector is needed to change practices in the handling of research data. A systemic change is needed, a paradigm shift, and a cultural change:

> Universities, research centres, academies, policy makers and funding bodies must review their evaluation methods in order to promote adhesion and commitment to the principles and practices that underpin FAIR data management, because, particularly at these early stages, researchers, data stewards, IT professionals, librarians and archivists, and many others in the research ecosystem need certainty that their involvement will be perceived

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4   A list of recommendations for evaluating digital research results can be found in Henny (2018).

5   See, e.g., the article "Nach den Büchern: Rezensionen digitaler Forschungsressourcen" (Neuber & Sahle, 2022), or the session "Attribution and Assessment of Digital Humanities Outputs," which took place on 16 November 2022 as part of the virtual symposium "Building Digital Humanities" and was organized by the *Digital Humanities Research Initiative.*

6   See, e.g., the report "Sustainable and FAIR Data Sharing in the Humanities" by the *European Association of Academies ALLEA* (2020), or the "Handreichung zum Umgang mit Forschungssoftware" (Katerbow & Feulner 2018), which is supported by the *Digital Information Priority Initiative of the Alliance of German Science Organizations.*

and recognized in ways that are beneficial to assessment and career pro-
gression (ALLEA 2020, 37).

There must be an incentive to disseminate research findings not only in the form of
a published text or print publication, but also in the form of digital resources. One
significant incentive for doing so is the formal recognition of the work and achieve-
ment associated with it. The fact that this recognition for digital research results is
not given in the traditional academic system with its established publication forms
and channels is one of the core topics of the discussion surrounding the evaluation of
digital research results. Efforts to change this lack of recognition are currently being
undertaken by some scientific organizations. Last year, on the initiative of the *Euro-
pean University Association* (EUA), *Science Europe,* and the European Commission, an
agreement was reached to reform the evaluation of research, which has already been
signed by over 600 organizations worldwide at the end of July 2023. The agreement
highlights, among other things, the range of types of scientific output and emphasizes
that these should be considered when evaluating scientific work:

> Recognise the diversity of research activities and practices, with a diversity
> of outputs, and reward early sharing and open collaboration [...]. Consider
> also the full range of research outputs, such as scientific publications, data,
> software, models, methods, theories, algorithms, protocols, workflows, ex-
> hibitions, strategies, policy contributions, etc. (Coalition for Advancing Re-
> search Assessment 2022, 4).

The addressees of the agreement are those who assess research to make funding de-
cisions, award prizes, define future strategies, and research directions and recruit
researchers. The agreement emphasizes the importance of qualitative evaluation and
peer review, i.e., the assessment of research by other researchers.

It is therefore clearly stated both by humanities scholars working digitally and
by academic organizations and funding institutions that digital research results
should be given greater consideration in the evaluation of academic work.

With regard to textual studies and the development and use of virtual research
environments, Tóth-Czifra writes of "pressing reharmonization efforts of research
evaluation and novel research practices" (Tóth-Czifra 2021): new research practices,
in which digital tools are fundamental and produce digital research results, have
found their way into the work of academics, but the evaluation criteria and systems
have not yet been sufficiently adapted to the new practices.

The reason for this lack of adaptation is, among other things, the nature of the
objects to be evaluated and how they are published. Digital objects have different
characteristics than printed texts, so that proven evaluation procedures cannot be
transferred directly. An important question is the timing of the evaluation of a digital
research result. In the case of a traditional print publication, there may be a review

before publication and a review after publication. In the digital world, publications can be easily updated. Errors can be corrected on an ongoing basis and deletions or additions can be made at any time, which implies that digital research results can be published earlier and then continuously in different versions. While still common practice to publish a finalized version of text publications, data sets, research software, or complex objects such as digital scholarly editions are often published as alpha or beta versions, in order to be completed on an ongoing basis. Evaluation can therefore take place at any time, considering the variability of the evaluated objects. While also possible for successive editions of printed products, if they contain updates, the dynamics are quite different. New versions of printed publications do not usually appear with the same frequency as new versions of digital publications.

A further issue is the question of which aspects of the digital research results should be evaluated. A digital corpus, an analysis tool, or a digital edition each have a content level that can be evaluated, but also a methodological and a technical level. These levels are often not created by individuals, but by teams in which each person contributes certain expertise. This results in just as many valuation perspectives. An evaluation can also be carried out from a developer or user perspective. Methodological and technical aspects are essential for digital research results, as they make a decisive contribution to their quality and sustainability. Questions concern, for example, the nature of data structures and source code, the use of technical standards, input and output formats, search options and user paths, and all of which go beyond the requirements from the humanities. Thus, new demands are placed on evaluators and reviewers when various aspects of digital resources are to be evaluated. Recommendations and handouts for the evaluation of digital research provide support.

In practice, however, digital resources are still rarely reviewed. Neuber & Sahle (2022) indicate, for example, that although there are review sites for the historical sciences in which digital resources are also discussed, it is done to a much lesser extent than reviews of book publications:

> To date (May 2022), 176 reviews of "websites and databases" and 163 reviews of "digital media" (e.g., CD-ROMs) have been published on H-Soz-Kult. These totals compare to more than 18,000 book reviews [...]. Traditional printed journals contain very few reviews of digital research achievements and results. The results are not different even in digital journals (Neuber & Sahle 2022).

Even in Digital Humanities journals, there are hardly any reviews of digital resources. The German-language *Zeitschrift für digitale Geisteswissenschaften* (ZfdG) publishes articles and *working papers,* however, reviews have not yet appeared. The journal *Digital Humanities Quarterly* (DHQ) most recently published on the topics of *Critical Code Studies* and *Tools Criticism* (vol. 17(2), 2023); however, the contributions are academic articles and not reviews in the narrower sense. DHQ also publishes *Reviews:*

since 2007, 47 book reviews, four reviews of conferences and workshops, and three reviews of digital resources have been published. The journal *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (DSH) has published 252 reviews since 1986, including 235 book reviews and 17 review articles, according to *Advanced Search,* wherein 13 of the review articles also contain book reviews, a conference report, one review of an exhibition, and one review of a digital commentary, as well as one that is not a review article. Even in relevant Digital Humanities journals, book reviews are more common than reviews of research data, tools, and other digital research results, which shows that established academic publication, evaluation systems, and cultures take time to change. Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely for this reason, there are several initiatives for reviewing digital resources in the Digital Humanities that stand outside the traditional journals and some of which are discussed here in the following.

2.   Initiatives for Reviewing Digital Resources
in the Digital Humanities

2.1   RIDE – A review journal for digital editions and resources

The review journal RIDE[7] has been publishing review articles on scholarly digital editions, digital text collections, corpora, and on tools and environments for digital scholarly editing since 2014. As of today, 88 review articles have been published in 17 volumes, mostly on digital scholarly editions, which form the focus of the journal. The journal is published by the *Institut für Dokumentologie und Editorik* (IDE) and is an exclusively digital publication in which the articles are published directly in open access in HTML and PDF format.

The starting point for the reviews in the journal are catalogs of criteria written by the members of the IDE and the RIDE Editorial Board, which are intended to help "negotiate digital resources in academic discourse, establish best practice, and advance the discussion of methods" (Sahle et al. 2014). To date, three criteria catalogs have been published for the journal's three sections: the "Criteria Catalog for Reviewing Digital Editions" (Sahle et al. 2014), the "Criteria for Reviewing Digital Text Collections" (Henny & Neuber 2017), and the "Criteria for Reviewing Tools and Environments for Digital Scholarly Editing" (Sichani & Spadini 2018). The catalogs detail the requirements for evaluating digital resources and which aspects should

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7   Cf. https://ride.i-d-e.de (Accessed: 19 June 2024). The author of this chapter has been involved in the publication of RIDE from the outset and has been one of the journal's managing editors since 2019. As there is a direct insight into the procedures for reviewing and editing the reviews, RIDE is presented in more detail than the other DH initiatives for reviews of digital resources, which can only be presented from an external perspective.

be centrally discussed. In addition to content-related, edition-philological, and corpus-related criteria, the areas of data modeling, technical implementation, and presentation on the web or user interface are also addressed. Doing so makes it clear that these reviews are a fundamental part of scholarly work on digital editions, text collections, and tools. At the same time, reviewers receive assistance in discussing the digital resources from an interdisciplinary perspective, whereby one does not assume that all elements are treated in a review, but only those relevant.

In RIDE, the reviews appear as articles that are accompanied by a "factsheet," in which essential information on the reviewed resource is summarized in tabular form. The source for the factsheets is questionnaires that are additionally filled out by the reviewers when submitting the review. The data collected in this way also makes it possible to carry out comparative analyses for all reviewed items in the respective field. Statistical graphs are available on the RIDE website, and all data and the review texts themselves are also available in a GitHub repository under a Creative Commons license.[8] The data-based view of the reviewed items ultimately goes back to the criteria catalogs, as the questionnaires were developed based on the catalogs. The reviews are changed by the criteria catalogs in comparison to classic reviews since comparable texts and data are highlighted. Nevertheless, the review articles represent individual perspectives on the reviewed editions, text collections, and tools, and are also considerably longer than classic book reviews: most articles comprise around 15 pages and are therefore closer in length to specialist research articles. This length difference is presumably due to the criteria catalogs, which show in detail what can be discussed in relation to a digital resource, while, on the other hand, the greater length is also a direct result of the diversity of the digital objects that the criteria catalogs depict.

The question of how to deal with the variability and temporality of digital resources when they are reviewed is solved in RIDE such that all links cited in the reviews that are not persistent addresses (such as DOIs or PURLs) are archived on the internet.[9] Archiving ensures that the review articles remain traceable even if link targets change or are no longer available. In addition, reviewers are advised to integrate screenshots as illustrations in the review texts if visual aspects are discussed. Changing resources in RIDE have already led to the same item being reviewed several times, creating an "update" of the review. There is also an effort on the part of the editors not to allow the period until the publication of the peer-reviewed reviews to become too long, in that since 2021 reviews no longer appear only in fully completed volumes, but also individually in a *rolling release* procedure.

The reviews in RIDE include digital resources as research objects in academic discourse by discussing them in text publications that appear in a review journal. This method enhances the review as a text type, given that the articles are more extensive than is usual for reviews and as they undergo a review process before publi-

8   Cf. https://github.com/i-d-e/ride (Accessed: 19 June 2024).
9   Cf. http://web.archive.org (Accessed: 19 June 2024).

cation. Both aspects should incentivize authors to write reviews of digital resources. However, the process also implies more work for writing and publishing. This approach is complemented by data-based access.[10]

2.2 Reviews in Digital Humanities

The journal *Reviews in Digital Humanities* has been peer-reviewing digital research since 2020. The editors describe the publication as a "pilot of a peer reviewed journal and project registry that facilitates scholarly evaluation and dissemination of Digital Humanities work and its outputs."[11] Unlike RIDE, the creators of digital resources submit project descriptions, which are then peer-reviewed by other researchers. Both the project description and the review are published in *Reviews in DH.* Submissions can be descriptions of digital archives, multimedia science, digital exhibitions, visualizations, computer games, and software. The journal also encourages submissions on digital scholarship in the fields of critical ethnic studies, African diaspora, indigenous peoples, Latinx, Asian American, and postcolonial studies. The project descriptions and reviews are published under a CC-BY license and are relatively short.[12] Since 2020, 4 annual volumes with a total of 39 issues have been published, each containing around 4 to 5 contributions. Each article is addressable with its own DOI. The submitted projects can also be searched via a "Project Registry" according to 4 criteria (alphabetically, by epoch, by subject area, and by topic or method).

In *Reviews in DH,* the authors of the project descriptions and reviews, as in RIDE, are given information on what can and should be addressed, including both scholarly and technical aspects. Reference is made to external handouts on the evaluation of digital science. The aim of the journal is to promote critical discourse on digital science and to do so in a way useful for other scientists. The journal aims specifically to address the "evaluation gap" resulting from the increasing number and scope of digital projects for which there is not enough opportunity for review in existing journals. At the same time, the importance of peer review for digital research is emphasized, as it is important for the recognition of scientific achievement in the creation of digital resources. "Reviews in DH" therefore takes a different approach than RIDE, as the reviews are deliberately kept short and include project descriptions. The content focus

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10 In addition to RIDE, there is also the initiative "Construction KIT: A review journal for research tools and data services" (CKIT), which was created in the context of the NFDI4Culture consortium of the *National Research Data Infrastructure.* The first review article was published in October 2023 in the journal, which focuses on research software. Cf. https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/ckit (Accessed: 19 June 2024).

11 See https://reviewsindh.pubpub.org (Accessed: 19 June 2024).

12 In 10 randomized samples pulled, the reviews were between approx. 400 and 1,100 words in length. The journal itself suggests a length of 500 words for both the project descriptions and the reviews.

is also broader than RIDE. All types of digital projects and resources can be submitted. In this way, a large number of projects can be examined. What both journals have in common is their desire to strengthen the review system for digital resources and offer systematic access to the content in addition to texts.[13]

2.3   DHTech Community Code Reviews

The *DHTech Community Code Reviews* is still a young initiative. The initiative reviews the code of software projects from the Digital Humanities. The initiative is backed by a working group of the *DHTech Special Interest Group* established in 2017 and is active under the umbrella of the international *Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations* (ADHO).[14] DHTech promotes the development and reuse of software in DH and provides a place of collaboration for all those involved in the development of software in this field of research.

The *Code Review* has been active since 2022 and have reviewed 3 tools.[15] Code reviews are a common technique in software development for improving software. The source code of a piece of software is reviewed by someone, not the author of the software, who is himself or herself a software programmer. In an interactive process, the software reviewers ask questions and make suggestions for improvement. In so doing, the quality of a program's source code can be improved by correcting errors and making the code more readable and easier to maintain. DHTech's code reviews are performed directly on the software development platform GitHub. The working group provides information on how a code review can be prepared, carried out, and the criteria according to which code can be reviewed. Developers submit their software for review. The prerequisite for review is a published code with a license, including documentation and sample data. Also, due to time constraints, an extensive code cannot be reviewed, only code that can be understood and reviewed within one hour.[16] A copy of the code is made for the purpose of the review and the code re-

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13   Like *Reviews in DH,* the *DHCommons Journal* combined short project descriptions with reviews of the projects. The journal was published from 2015 to 2016 by the international network *center-Net* but is no longer available online. Since 2017, the European project DARIAH-EU has also been publishing the blog "OpenMethods: Highlighting Digital Humanities Methods and Tools" (https://openmethods.dariah.eu, accessed: 19 June 2024). Short blog posts draw attention to curated content on DH methods and tools since there remains little focus on these issues in the DH literature. These issues are important to discuss critically to highlight the value, opportunities, and challenges of DH. Content selected for the blog undergoes a quality check and is categorized according to the TaDiRAH taxonomy, which can then be used to filter the blog's content. The OpenMethods blog takes a minimalist approach to reviewing DH methods and tools.

14   Cf. https://adho.org/sigs/#DHTech (Accessed: 19 June 2024).

15   Cf. https://dhcodereview.github.io (Accessed: 19 June 2024).

16   Cf. https://github.com/DHCodeReview/DHCodeReview/wiki/Authors:-Preparing-a-Code-Review (Accessed: 16 June 2024).

viewers can then comment on it directly.[17] The "Code Review Guidelines" provided by DHTech give instructions for the dialog between developers and reviewers and checklists for essential properties of the source code to be reviewed.[18]

Regarding the review of digital resources, DHTech's *Community Code Reviews* represent a completely different approach than the review journals presented in this chapter. By reviewing source code, they are directly and exclusively addressing the technical level of DH tools. The software is not evaluated and contextualized in a review text; the reviewers engage directly with the developers, with the aim of providing feedback and improving the quality of the digital resource. Due to digital resources being constantly updated, suggestions for improvement from reviewers are also frequently accepted in other cases and implemented for future versions. These are mediated by the review text yet not as directly as with code reviews. The code reviews are a very important initiative, as the work of research software developers has hardly been recognized in traditional scientific and academic discourse. However, the code reviews also take place outside the usual publication channels in the humanities. In contrast to RIDE, *Code Reviews* are not attempting to make the digital resources the object of classic specialist reviews; instead, a form of review is selected that is directly oriented towards the reviewed object and follows the practices of software development.[19]

3.   Prospect: On the Importance and Forms of Reviews
of Digital Resources

Reviews of digital resources remain far too rare. Although humanities scholars now work with digital data and tools in almost all areas and produce research results in digital form, reviewing is still mainly focused on reviewing traditional forms of scholarly output such as monographs, edited volumes, articles, and other publications that can be traced back to the book form, regardless of whether they appear in print or digitally. Websites with scientific content, scientifically compiled and edited data collections, and digital objects as well as research software have thus far rarely been reviewed in specialist journals in the humanities, even in the DH themselves.

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17   Cf. https://github.com/DHCodeReview/DHCodeReview/wiki/Conducting-a-Code-Review (Accessed: 16 June 2024).

18   Cf.   https://github.com/DHCodeReview/DHCodeReview/wiki/Code-Review-Guidelines   (Accessed: 16 June 2024).

19   Software reviews are also performed by the *Journal of Open Source Software* (JOSS), in which developers can submit short essays on their research software. Both the software and the essay are then reviewed by experts.

Thus, there have been a number of recent initiatives developed in the DH that are specifically dedicated to the review of digital resources, such as the review journals RIDE and *Reviews in DH* presented here or the *Community Code Reviews* within the DHTech Working Group. Different approaches to reviews of digital resources have been taken. On the one hand, digital resources become the subject of reviews in text form, thereby integrating them into the normal academic discourse. The reviews of digital resources retain the essential functions of classic reviews: an overview of the project, an evaluation of the subject matter, and an overall classification of the work into the wider disciplinary context. Even still, the form of the reviews changes when referring to digital objects; they are juxtaposed with project descriptions, accompanied by indexes and data collections, and vary in scope. There have been attempts to simplify the process for reviewers to discuss complex digital resources by providing them with guidelines so that humanities scholars can also take technical aspects into account.

In the future, reviews of digital resources could either be written collaboratively by several authors with different specialist backgrounds, or there could be several reviews written by individual authors, each focusing on a specific layer of the review of the digital resource in question, such as their content, data models and algorithms, the technical implementation, or aspects of the design of the presentation in the digital world. A review of different layers of digital resources helps to disclose and recognize the scientific work of those involved in their production. Reviews can then also take on completely new forms that move further away from traditional text reviews, such as the example given by the code reviews for the assessment of software. It will be important that new forms of review are also recognized as part of the scientific discourse. Regardless of exactly how reviews of digital resources are implemented and designed, the most important aspect is that they are carried out at all and that they provide the digital transformation of science and the academy with an appropriate and functioning practice of evaluation and assessment. Reviews of digital resources can support the transition to an open, digital scientific culture by creating incentives for scientists to continue producing and publishing digital research results. They are a building block in a process of change that also encompasses other areas, such as citation practices, rules for recording scientific publications in reference systems, or the evaluation of research achievements in general.

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