A common response to an electronic book or other digital media is that, while it may be better or worse than a book, “this is not a book.” But digital media has the uncanny effect of making us realize that physical books themselves were never truly books—if by “book” we mean a long form of attention designed for the permanent, standard, and authoritative communication of human thought or experience. Recent research in book history also suggests that there was nothing sacred about the physical book as the carrier of enduring meanings and values important for a culture, nation, or people. This talk outlines methods for discovering and tracking socially repeatable and valued “long forms of attention” whether in books or other constellations of materials, in the past or the digital present. The talk concludes with a look at the RoSE (Research-oriented Social Environment) being created by a team at the University of California, Santa Barbara, directed by Liu.

Alan Liu is Professor in the English Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and an affiliated faculty member of UCSB’s Media Arts & Technology graduate program.

He began his research in the field of British romantic literature and art. His first book, Wordsworth: The Sense of History (Stanford University Press, 1989), explored the relation between the imaginative experiences of literature and history. In a series of theoretical essays in the 1990s, he explored cultural criticism, the “new historicism,” and postmodernism in contemporary literary studies. In 1994, when he started his Voice of the Shuttle Web site for humanities research, he began to study information culture as a way to close the circuit between the literary or historical imagination and the technological imagination. In 2004, he published his The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information (University of Chicago Press). In 2008, he also published from University of Chicago Press his Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database.

Liu is currently working on books about the digital humanities and the relationship between media and history.

Professor Alan Liu’s full CV can be found online at http://liu.english.ucsb.edu/wp-includes/docs/liu-cv.pdf