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Evolving in Common: Creating Mutually Supportive Relationships Between Libraries and the Digital Humanities

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Abstract:

Based on Micah Vandegrift's article *What is digital humanities and what's it doing in the library?* and Stewart Varner's response to that piece, this article offers an overview of the foundational ideals where libraries and digital humanities overlap. The authors lay out practical ways for libraries to involve themselves in this evolving area, especially focused on current strengths of many libraries including commitments to resource accessibility and project development. Finally, this article proposes that the role of the research librarian is evolving in order to effectively integrate the library as a partner in the scholarship of digital humanities.

Introduction

Libraries and the humanities have always had a great deal in common. Each in their own way, they are tasked with collecting, organizing and preserving our shared, collective memory. They help us remember the past, understand the present and build the future. They are also both experiencing an extremely challenging historical moment where external critics are questioning their value. Libraries are constantly plagued by doubts about their continued relevance (DelGuidice, 2012) and gloomy assessments about the death of the humanities (Fish, 2008) are equally common. One could get the impression that both are shushing and critically-theorizing themselves down the drain hole.ⁱ

However, this is certainly not the impression one gets from the inside. Taking care to avoid any narrative that makes technology out to be a savior, it is clear that the recent relatively widespread adoption of digital tools by humanists has had an invigorating effect on both scholarly research and pedagogy. The Digital Humanities, as they are often called, is a broad term that covers many kinds

of scholarly work. Some digital humanists focus on how technology is transforming teaching by giving students multiple and exciting ways to connect with course materials. Others focus on how the Internet has revolutionized scholarly publishing by making previously hard-to-find resources and scholarship available to the world. Still others are experimenting with ways to ask questions and look for patterns in collections of digital texts using sophisticated programming and data visualization tools.

As different as these uses may be, a common thread that runs through each is the realization that technology is allowing humanities work to be both more engaging and more accessible. Similarly, libraries are undergoing revolutionary changes as information technology evolves to make a librarian's wildest dreams seem eminently possible. The roles and responsibilities of research librarians are shifting to encompass the broadening scope of scholarship, especially involving digital archival and special collections, digital tools and progressive service models. The research community, which has moved toward technology over the past 10-15 years, is coalescing around the ideas of open access to scholarship and the benefits to the public, the library and the scholar. Pairing with the digital push in the humanities, the library can reinvent its place in the cycle and production of scholarship.

There is a real opportunity in these parallel moments of technological innovation for exciting new partnerships to form between libraries and the humanities. Each section of this paper starts with a key text from the digital humanities community and tries to offer both a birds-eye view of the issues and practical ideas for libraries. The first section of this paper teases out the practical and philosophical reasons why digital humanities and libraries make natural partners. The next section focuses on how to make these partnerships work. The third section turns to the library as a physical space that is well positioned to be a hub for the kinds of experimental collaboration the digital

humanities often generates. The final section begins to imagine new directions for libraries and librarians as they engage the digital humanities.

Why Digital Humanities? – On Spiro

In her presentation “Why Digital Humanities?” (2011), Lisa Spiro outlines what she sees as the goals of the digital humanities. As the Director of National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE) Labs and Editor of the Digital Research Tools (DiRT) wiki, Spiro focuses on five areas where digital humanities aims beyond traditional academic scholars:

1. Provide wide access to cultural information
2. Enable manipulation of that data,
3. Transform scholarly communication
4. Enhance teaching and learning, and
5. Make a public impact.

To those of us who live in libraries, these goals should sound very familiar as concern for access and public impact are among our most important values. This convergence of values probably explains why there is already a rich tradition of library partnerships in digital humanities projects. Indeed some of the longest running and most venerated projects are essentially online archives and have often been produced by faculty-library partnerships. The Rossetti Archive at the University of Virginia, the Walt Whitman Archive at the University of Nebraska and Emory’s Women Writers Resource Projectⁱⁱ are just three examples of such partnerships where technology is used not only to provide wide access to valuable collections but to add value to those collections as well.

Furthermore, emerging library resources such as digital repositories, cooperative linked data projects and technologically enabled collaborative working environments offer exciting new ways

for scholars to work with libraries, not just in them. Even projects that build scholarly tools (such as digital exhibit builder Omeka and the data visualization tool Voyant) are still generally focused on increasing access.

Even the goals on Spiro's list that seem to resonate less with traditional library work –manipulating data and transforming scholarly communication, for example – point toward exciting new paths for libraries. This is important because, as a recent College and Research Libraries News article reported, “Academic libraries must prove the value they provide to the academic enterprise... unless we give our funding bodies better and more compelling reasons to support libraries, they will be forced by economic reality to stop doing so”(ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, 2012).

The digital humanities offer libraries multiple ways to prove their value but they involve expanding beyond collection building and partnering with scholars in the act of creation. Whether these partnerships produce a website, a digitized collection with a built in text-mining tool, or a tool to add layers of meaning to maps, making “stuff” indicates effectively that there is work being done to provide valuable, useful, interesting content to an information-hungry world. Additionally, these projects have the ability to grow, develop, adapt and entice a wide variety of users including programmers, armchair historians, high-school students, and, potentially, funding bodies. Tying the library's strengths, people and ideals to tangible products of scholarly work, whether they be publications or not, will give libraries a powerful response the next time a legislator claims “its all on Google anyways.”

Just as the digital humanities offer libraries an opportunity to expand into exciting new directions, libraries can help the humanities as they have also found themselves on the defensive in recent

years. Eloquently making the case for open access, itself an important issue for libraries, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Director of Scholarly Communication for the Modern Language Association, pointed out the need for the humanities to take access and engagement more seriously. “Closing our work away from non-scholarly readers, and keeping our conversations private,” she writes (2012), “might protect us from public criticism, but it can’t protect us from public apathy, a condition that is, in the current economy, far more dangerous.” Libraries are well positioned to help the humanities open up to the broader public.

There are a few specific things libraries can do to make it easier to begin these partnerships. For example, establish a digitization strategy that gives priority to collections that are unique and particularly attractive to your users. Once you have done that, make sure users can get the most out of these collections by making sure they are searchable and linkable by being thoughtful about format, metadata and persistent URLs. Lastly, promote your digital collections to the point that only those faculty members who are conducting research under large rocks will be unaware of them.

What is digital humanities, and what’s it doing in the library?

In the summer of 2010, Matthew Kirschenbaum, Professor of English at the University of Maryland, published a piece for the Association of Departments of English titled "What Is Digital Humanities and What's it Doing in English Departments?" That piece became one of the central works in defining the movement toward a Digital Humanities (DH). Kirschenbaum’s thesis is that over time “digital humanities has accumulated a robust professional apparatus that is probably more rooted in English than any other departmental home” (2010). As definitive (and well-supported) as that claim is, he leaves room for an expansion and ends the article writing that:

...Digital humanities today is about a scholarship (and a pedagogy) that is publicly visible in ways to which we are generally unaccustomed, a scholarship and pedagogy that are bound up with infrastructure in ways that are deeper and more explicit than we are generally accustomed to, a scholarship and pedagogy that are collaborative and depend on networks of people and that live an active 24/7 life online.

In this publicly visible, collaborative, online network and infrastructure the Library should begin to see potential to become a true scholarly partner.

These partnerships need not be viewed as a radical departure from the traditional strengths of a research library. Indeed, these strengths mirror and complement the needs at the core of the digital humanities. Librarians have a sophisticated understanding of copyright and fair use, ready access to a wealth of material culture, a keen sense of the organization and usability of information and the enthusiasm and passion to see a project through. Additionally, scholars with graduate degrees are often turning to the library to pursue careers outside the traditional tenure track. While the presence of scholar-librarians is not particularly new, the current crop of so-called Alt-Acsⁱⁱⁱ (alternative academics) is increasingly being called upon to occupy the space between the library and the academic departments and serve as digital ambassadors and experimental researchers.

Keen to exercise both their library skills and their academic training, these new librarians are often eager to develop projects with colleagues both in the library and in the departments. Some research libraries, anticipating these partnerships, have established centers to facilitate digital work. The Scholars Lab at the University of Virginia, Maryland of Institute of Technology and Humanities (MITH) and the Digital Scholarship Commons (DiSC) at Emory University are each focused on

finding ways to leverage their experiences and strengths so that the Digital Humanities can thrive in the library.

Even in libraries that have not established dedicated digital centers, partnering on digital projects is common for library staff. An ARL SPEC Kit completed by library staff at Emory University found that nearly half of the libraries that responded to the survey support digital humanities work at some level (Bryson, Posner, St. Pierre & Varner, 2011). However, the survey also revealed that this support is generally *ad hoc* with processes being created on the fly for each project individually. As it is now clear that partnering with scholars on digital projects is an exciting new direction for libraries, creating a well-thought-out process for how these partnerships work is a valuable use of time. Here are a few points to keep in mind:

- At the conception of a project, assess what copyright and intellectual property questions might emerge. Many digital projects depend on digitizing items and making them available online. It is important to determine what legal and the ethical challenges may emerge in doing so.
- If it is legal and ethical to digitize items, the library will also want to determine if it has the capacity to do so. Many libraries have established digitization programs with set strategies for determining which items are processed and in what order. If your library has done this, see if it is possible to get the to-be digitized items into the queue.
- Decide what applications your library will support and what it will not. The trick is to find the fewest number of tools you can offer while satisfying the most needs. Look for reusable, open-source tools with large user communities. For example, Wordpress and Omeka are excellent, easy-to-use tools for creating web pages.
- After you have answered all the questions about how you are going to build your project, decide what is going to happen when you are finished. Can your library continue to host the

project as long as it is active? What about long-term preservation? Unlike books, many digital projects continue to grow even after they are “finished” and you can’t just stick them in a climate-controlled room when you are ready to archive them. It is crucial that everyone understands these challenges and that agrees to the same plan.

What You Do with a Million Books, Screwmaneutically Speaking: The Library as Place – On Ramsay

Wayne Wiegand, historian of print culture and libraries, has a simple mantra for libraries; he says that rather than understanding “the user in the life of the library, we must see the library in the life of the user”(2005). Clearly, many of the changes we have seen in libraries in recent years have been in response to the evolution of the library user. Computer terminals have replaced the card catalog, programming now includes training in effective web searching, and coffee is always close at hand.

As the library continues to evolve, it must increasingly function as a place where scholars can try new things, explore new methodologies and generally experiment with new ways of doing scholarship. Stephen Ramsay, Associate Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and a Fellow at the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities, in his *The Hermeneutics of Screwing Around; or What You Do with a Million Books* (2010) suggests that browsing, in opposition to searching, is a cultural imperative. Browsability, in the most traditional sense, is still a relatively sore subject in librarianship. As resources move digital, and space is reallocated from stacks to “labs” and “commons,” the argument has been that browsing is non-imperative to the mission-critical tasks of the modern library. However, as Ramsay puts it:

It’s not a matter of replacing one with the other, as any librarian will tell you. It is rather to ask whether we are ready to accept surfing and stumbling—screwing around, broadly understood—as a research methodology. For to do so would be to countenance the

irrefragable complexities of what ‘no one really knows.’ Could we imagine a world in which ‘Here is an ordered list of the books you should read,’ gives way to, ‘Here is what I found. What did you find?’

The library can no longer be simply a place to get the right answers or to be directed to the correct resource; it must facilitate Ramsay’s “Screwmenetical Imperative” in browsability and playfulness. The reference interview, guiding a patron to a specific research question in order to provide a specific research answer, rather than offering a method of way-finding, needs to adapt to allow for exploration, particularly in dealing with scholars and students in the humanities.

Further, the library must be willing to allow dedicated time for what happens after exploration. The “serve ‘em and send ‘em along” model is no longer serving a patronage whose information needs include planning, building and executing projects that utilize the strengths of librarianship (information organization and broad contextualization).

Reframing the library as a productive place, a creative place engaged in producing and creating something – whether that be digital scholarly works or something else entirely – will open the door to allow the library into the life of the user. One role for the library in DH, then, is to support the journey of research as a means in itself, and encourage imaginative, new, transformative uses of the products of research.^{iv} Paradoxically, the best way to understand where to begin transforming the library into the kind of space where experimental digital humanities work can thrive is to leave the building, literally and virtually. Don’t wait for users to come to you and tell you what they want; get out into the community to get a sense of what people are working on. For example:

- Attend events put on by the departments and centers you work with. It will be particularly valuable to attend events where scholars present their work. In addition to events like

prospectus defenses, many departments host colloquia for the express purpose making sure everyone knows what everyone else is working on.

- In addition to keeping up with what is going on in person, sign up for department listservs and keep up with social media, if that is common in the department you serve. Also, become a fountain of information in these channels by announcing resources, projects and events.
- See if there are councils or committees that might like to hear from you. Most colleges have umbrella organizations like the Humanities Council or the Social Science Committee. These groups are often great resources for thinking about campus-wide initiatives and are, thus, an important source of information and a potential venue for librarians who want better understand and even influence the way scholars use the library.

In addition to keeping up with what is going on around campus, it is important for librarians to be connected to what the broader Digital Humanities community is talking about. By keeping up with this network, librarians are able to see trends that may not have reached their campuses yet and get ideas for projects from leaders in the field. Here are a few tips on how to stay current:

- Get involved in the online social networks where Digital Humanities is a big topic. For better or worse, DH communicates via Twitter. Pictures of cats and lunch are kept to a minimum but conferences and projects are announced and questions are asked and answered.
- Once you have signed up for Twitter, follow Digital Humanities Now. This resources filters overwhelming quantity of writing about Digital Humanities and delivers only the work that gets the most attention.
- Attend (or host!) a THATCamp
- Read Lisa Spiro's fantastic blog post, [Getting Started in the Digital Humanities](#)

- Join ACRL's Digital Humanities Discussion Group, a recently formed venue for ACRL members to meet and share ideas related to Digital Humanities and the role of librarians in this emerging discipline.
- Familiarize yourself with the tools that exist to facilitate digital scholarship. The Digital Research Tools (DiRT) Wiki is a directory of tools, services, and collections that can facilitate digital research, is an incredible resource for faculty and librarians alike.

By understanding the kinds of work scholars on your campus are doing and being familiar with the work being done at the cutting edge of digital humanities, you will be well positioned to make your library an integral part of the intellectual lives of your users.

#alt-LIS, Skunks, Hybrarians and “strange institutions” – On Nowvskie

Recognizing why and how libraries can be an important part of the digital humanities and reimagining the space of the library itself all points toward a deeper, more fundamental shift that is underway. This is also connected to the other transformations and upheavals that have characterized the recent history of research libraries. Altering the organization of the institution, doing away with reference desks, introducing new media, and all other growing pains libraries endure are ill-informed developments if the librarians, paraprofessionals and support staff have not re-imagined themselves and their skill-sets.^v Digital humanities, already redefining the humanities and scholars therein as per Kirschenbaum's aforementioned piece, offers a looking glass through which to step. As mentioned above, the shift toward alternative appointments in libraries (#alt-LIS = scholarly communications, digital humanities librarians, data librarianship, E-Science, digital archivists, project-based appointments, etc.) is building the capacity for the library to be productively integrated in digital scholarship.^{vi}

Bethany Nowvieskie, Director of Digital Research & Scholarship at the University of Virginia Library, is an advocate for this great migration away from traditionally understood librarian roles. Several articles available on her blog, “Fight Club Soap,” “Lazy Consensus,” and “A Skunk in the Library,” challenge the concept that a good librarian is a servant to the academic community, sitting in wait to provide for whatever the need may be. She writes, plainly and boldly:

...[There is] a fundamental misunderstanding that librarians make in our dealing with faculty – and it comes down to what is, honestly, one of the most lovely qualities of library culture: its service ethic... The impulse is to provide a level of self-effacing service – quiet and efficient perfection – with a goal of not distracting the researcher from his work. You start this with the best of intentions, but it can lead to an ad-hoc strategy, in good times and bad, of laying a smooth, professional veneer over increasingly decrepit and under-funded infrastructure – effectively, of hiding the messy innards of the library from your faculty, the very people who would be your strongest allies if the building weren’t a black box (2011).

These kinds of statements produce a high level of anxiety in librarians. However, approaching a new frame of mind as an opportunity rather than a death sentence would seem to be the more productive response. Accepting the responsibility to (quickly) adapt and evolve may incite a greater enthusiasm for the library among patrons, and propel its changing role in scholarly processes.

At the July 2011 meeting of the Scholarly Communications Institute, of which Nowvieskie is a Co-Director, Shana Kimball, Head of Publishing Services, Outreach & Strategic Development for MPublishing at University of Michigan Libraries, proposed the idea that what is necessary are more “strange institutions,” blending libraries, research centers, publishing houses and technology-producers (2011). These peculiarities, she goes on to comment, would require a workforce of

“Scholar Programmers,” elsewhere called “scholar technologists,” or in the context of the library, librarians. More often than not, this new breed of worker is not-necessarily an MLIS holder, to the chagrin and horror of library-land. However, DH, and those invested in its future, are seeking these skill-sets, again providing an open door for librarians to revamp their self-perception and thus their perceptibility. Echoing Nowviskie’s Fight Club reference, and as a challenge to librarians, “You decide your own level of involvement.”

Part of the process of deciding your own involvement will be deciding what you can give up. By now it is obvious to anyone who has been paying the slightest bit of attention that the job of the librarian is changing in ways both large and small. While librarians have a great history tackling new responsibilities they still have to deal with the constraints of the time/space continuum. Librarians - and, very importantly, library administrators - will have to take a look at the workload and see what could change. The absolutely crucial thing to remember here is that new roles and responsibilities do not require an entirely new staff (though you may need a bigger one). Librarians are, practically by definition, intelligent, curious and adaptable. They are not afraid of new challenges but they are afraid that they will not be given a chance to face them. With the right support, an experienced librarian can play a pivotal role in helping the library effectively and meaningfully engage with the digital humanities.

Conclusion

In closing, several points remain. This has all been said before.^{vii} There are already advocates inside and outside the library for deep collaboration on projects that fit into the DH mold. What, then, is digital humanities and what’s it doing in the library? In every real sense, the library always/already has the necessary pieces in place to support, engage in and do digital humanities work. The

underlying issue is simply this: Digital Humanities doesn't have a place in the library. Digital humanists do.

"Librarians" working in and across digital areas, who have been called many things over time, need to proudly identify themselves as DHers, and fully expect to be regarded as such by peers, colleagues, faculty and administrators, and let the broad work they do engage with that community.

The problem is not browsing or access it is timidity. And until librarianship moves away from our academic inferiority complex, and embraces the calling of digital work in contrast to the vocation of servitude, digital humanities will continue to be led by smart, capable, progressive faculty members in English and History. Quoting Ramsay again, in order for the library to do digital humanities it must embrace the charge to become "a bunch of people who had found each other through various means and who were committed to the bold and revolutionary project of talking to one another about their common interests" (2012) outside the four walls of the library.

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The Journal of Digital Humanities. <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/>

The CUNY Digital Humanities Resource Guide -

http://commons.gc.cuny.edu/wiki/index.php/The_CUNY_Digital_Humanities_Resource_Guide

Digital Humanities Now - showcases the scholarship and news of interest to the digital humanities community, through a process of aggregation, discovery, curation, and review.

<http://digitalhumanitiesnow.org/>

Hacking The Academy - a book crowdsourced in one week.

<http://hackingtheacademy.org/libraries/>

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ⁱ See also The Huffington Post's Libraries In Crisis section -

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/libraries-in-crisis>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/>, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/> and <http://womenwriters.library.emory.edu/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/alt-ac/>

^{iv} Also noted in the recent CLIR report "One Culture. Computationally Intensive Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences." Brief commentary with links to the report -

<http://digitallibrarians.org/node/6150>

^v For recent news items about these developments see:

<http://www.npr.org/2012/05/29/153900929/libraries-grapple-with-the-downside-of-e-books>, [http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/home/890714-](http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/home/890714-264/librarians_are_the_future_mls.html.csp)

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<http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2012/02/academic-libraries/harvard-library-releases-org-chart-offers-buyouts/>

^{vi} From a session at THATCamp Southeast, 2012 titled "Alt-LIS OR The Question of the Hybrarian OR What is digital humanities and What's it doing in the Library?" Accessible at

<http://southeast2012.thatcamp.org/03/08/alt-lis/>

^{vii} See: [JISC: Does the library have a role to play in the digital humanities?](#), Jennifer Vinopal's

[Why understanding Digital Humanities is key for libraries](#), [Digital Humanities: Roles for](#)

[Libraries](#) by Hitoshi Kamada, [Roles of librarians in digital humanities centers](#) from the Digital Libraries Initiative 2010 meeting.