

The Librarian as Digital Humanist: The Collaborative Role of the Research Library in Digital Humanities Projects

Leigh Cunningham

Leigh Cunningham is a recent graduate of the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, and Collections and Instruction Librarian at Medicine Hat College in Alberta. Her research interests include information literacy, faculty-librarian collaboration, and technology initiatives in libraries, including virtual reference, digital collections and services to distance education students.

Abstract

Traditional modes of scholarship are being challenged by the introduction

of open access and electronic publishing. Humanities disciplines are slower to embrace the application of digital tools to scholarly research. Digital humanities projects offer opportunities for collaboration between librarians, researchers, and social scientists. Examining the literature on library-faculty relationships indicates that collaboration remains low. Many libraries directly support digitization projects of primary sources, as libraries and archives maintain stewardship over these collections. Issues of access, preservation, and dissemination of digital scholarly content are examined. Digital humanities partnerships between faculty and librarians, as well as projects initiated by librarians are discussed.

Introduction

Libraries are facing many challenges in the digital age and are moving from a traditional print model to encompass digital collections, electronic journals and virtual reference service. Similarly, traditional modes of scholarship are being challenged with the introduction of e-journals and advocacy for access to open source content. The humanities disciplines have been slow to embrace these digital opportunities in comparison to their colleagues in the natural and social sciences. However, the field of digital

humanities contrasts with the traditional model of humanities scholarship as it shares its purpose of amassing digital collections with libraries. These changes force libraries and scholars alike to rethink the role of research in the digital environment. The digital humanities field seems to offer a realm of study for exploring the changing dynamics between the research library and the scholar.

A commenter on the Literatures in English blog writes that digital humanities offer “a natural venue for collaboration between librarians, researchers and computer scientists, and the best projects combine the technical proficiency, subject knowledge, and information organization skills and end-user focus of all three groups” (“Thoughts on the digital humanities”, 2008). However, the author also noted a low attendance of librarians at digital humanities lectures. If digital humanities projects are best described as collaborative research projects that depend on a wide range of expertise, what roles do librarians and the research library play in the creation and maintenance of these projects? Many digital humanities projects are housed on library servers and the scholars implementing such projects make use of the library’s primary source material for the research that serves as the basis for such projects. Librarians can provide expertise in the use of library resources, but it is not easy to tell how much input the library has in the initiation of original research. This paper explores the tradition of library support for faculty research, faculty-librarian relationships, and the collaborative nature of digital

humanities. Further, this paper examines projects where libraries and librarians have contributed significantly to the development of research, and seeks to determine potential opportunities in the future of research libraries and digital humanities projects.

The Role of the Librarian in Faculty Research

The type of collaboration required in digital humanities projects seems like a natural arena for faculty-librarian interaction. However, this collaboration is dependent on strong partnerships between faculty and library. Further, in order to determine the ease at which such collaborations might evolve in new projects, it is necessary to explore the role that the library performs in scholarship. There is much literature in the library and information sciences about faculty-librarian relationships. It is usually revealed that faculty appreciate and respect the library and the work of librarians but, in general, librarians are not regarded as research partners. In their article “A report on librarian-faculty relations from a sociological perspective”, Christiansen, Stompler, and Thaxton (2004) provide a detailed overview of literature in the library sciences on this subject. The authors state that many of these relationships are focused on curriculum development, grant writing, collection development, and research. However, pointing to several institutions and surveys of faculty members, the study posits that very little collaboration is taking place between librarians and faculty despite libraries’ adoption of liaison

librarian service models. Further, the study reveals that faculty and librarians are “generally separated” in their functions and responsibilities (p. 117). While this finding may not be surprising as it is in line with the findings of other studies, Christiansen, Stombler, and Thaxton (2004) note a disparity in the perceptions of faculty and librarians on this divide: “in striking contrast to the perspective of librarians, faculty perceive no serious problems in relations between the two groups, nor do they identify any negative consequences arising from this disconnection” (p. 118). One reason for this discord proposed by the study’s authors is the difference in research culture. Libraries are collaborative in nature, seeking out relationships with students, encouraging sharing and cooperation. In contrast, the culture of faculty has traditionally been “generally more isolated and proprietary”, and inter-faculty relationships are informal and difficult to document (p. 119). Digital humanities projects may be seen as changing this traditional research culture in the humanities, and librarians and the research library need to seize this opportunity to foster more collaborative relationships with faculty.

Libraries and the Development of Digital Humanities Projects

‘Digital humanities’ is a term that encompasses a range of humanities scholarship that makes use of information technology. These uses vary across fields of study within the humanities, and can include digital images and artifacts to encoded text that may be analysed. Here, digital humanities includes projects that

seek to create collections in the form of editions or archives with the purpose of forging new types of research facilitated by digital access and tools. Another type of digital humanities project can be seen in the development of digital libraries as libraries initiate digitization projects of their resources. The first type of project is similar to books that tell a “research story” and include analysis and interpretation of cultural objects and artifacts; the second type includes collaborations between scholars and cultural institutions to digitize and provide access to their collections for research purposes (Borgman, 2007, p. 220). These two avenues produce similar results: taking existing primary and secondary sources, in print format, and making them available electronically through images or encoded texts. However, though the initiative of each group may be considered differently, the goal of each is ultimately to repurpose resources for new scholarship and discovery by a wider user base. Digital libraries not only make available fast, easy, remote access to archives but they also allow completely new discoveries to be made (Besser, 2004).

Digital humanities projects offer incentives as well as some disadvantages to humanities scholars. Without the economic competitiveness of the sciences, digital humanities projects rely on the perceived cultural value of resources and can often attract funds based on the fact that they provide access to significant sources of historical value for educational purposes (Borgman, 2007). Also, the primary sources used for research are usually regarded as ‘open to all’, as they are in libraries

and archives. While the lack of research support and technological tools remain critical obstacles, one of the major barriers to the implementation of digital humanities projects is the barrier faced in academic procedures for tenure and promotion (Borgman, 2007). Cohen (2009) disappointingly points out that only nine out of the hundreds of sessions at the upcoming 2010 American Historical Association annual meeting relate to digital projects.

With these two approaches to digital humanities projects producing similar results we can presume that digital libraries and scholar-developed digital humanities projects will intersect, and when that occurs, they will be able to complement and enhance each other through collaboration. One reason why collaboration is becoming increasingly necessary is that such projects combine scholarship and technology, requiring experts to navigate each terrain (Szylowicz & Kibbee, 2004). The scale of a project is the primary force driving collaboration and the impetus for acquiring assistance from a range of contributors. The library has primary documents and staff with expertise in creating, maintaining and preserving digital content, as well as ensuring that the content meets the needs of its users. Scholars can provide primary research and initiative in developing the sources to digitize, and will also be one of the largest user groups able to manipulate the content for scholarly discovery. Other contributors needed are information technology personnel, administrative staff and assistants.

Cooperation amongst institutions is another aspect to consider when regarding

collaborative approaches. For example, libraries have found that sharing the cost of digitizing and bringing together related projects at different libraries and universities is efficient and provides greater scope and reunification to resources (Szylowicz & Kibbee, 2004). This type of inter-library collaboration continues a long history of networked libraries that work together to deliver services, from interlibrary loan to shared virtual reference service (Besser, 2004).

The emphasis of the role of libraries in digital humanities predictably falls on the role of libraries and archives as collectors of documents. Mary Ann Mavrinac (2008), Chief Librarian at University of Toronto Mississauga, points out the traditional role of libraries: “At its core, the research library has collected, organized, made accessible, stored and preserved collections for current and future generations of scholars” (para. 6). It would seem natural then to assume that the library will continue to play this role in a digital context. Further, Jonathan Bengtson, Associate Librarian for Scholarly Resources at the University of Toronto, claims that amassing digitized material is not enough, and that “libraries need to work with faculty to build data analysis and archiving tools to exploit the full potential of this format” (as cited in Mavrinac, 2008, para. 5). It is clear from the position of these librarians that libraries want to be involved alongside faculty in the creation and evolution of digital projects, and that librarians see their role as crucial to the success of digital humanities. However, the level of participation of libraries and librarians is

difficult to gauge, as is the value placed on the work of librarians by colleagues in a collaborative environment.

Challenges in the Digital Research Environment

The particular challenges faced in the digital research environment need the expertise of libraries to navigate and to help create solutions. Three major issues with digital content pose challenges to the research library. First, the possibility, or at least the fear of the possibility, that electronic resources will replace print resources altogether, second, the problem of preservation of digital content, and third, the dissemination and management of access to digital resources.

With mass digitization of library resources and other print primary sources, some might argue that the creation of digital objects creates not only a digital surrogate or representation, but also replaces the need for print or physical materials in the library as well. From one perspective, digitization creates new interest, access and repurposing of library resources, reinvigorating a collection and inspiring new uses of the materials. The other side to this debate is that even when the library is heavily involved in digitization projects, this effort creates a disservice to libraries because it decreases the level of visibility of the library, making it an invisible presence subject to being forgotten. Jeffrey A. Rydberg-Cox (2006) addresses this challenge facing libraries in the advent of new modes of scholarship:

In the traditional model of scholarly communication, these digital resources

are an extension of the books and monographs that scholars would produce with the expectation that the academic culture of presses and research libraries would acquire these works, disseminate them broadly and preserve them for the future. ...This challenge is not simply adapting to the changing needs of a major constituent group, but actually preserving the relevance of a library as an institution. For example, the functionality of the Valley of the Shadow and Perseus projects has allowed them to largely supplant traditional libraries in their areas of focus. (p. 12).

In contrast, some projects that involve digitized rare and fragile materials, such as the Illuminating the Manuscript Leaves project at the University of Louisville, claim that “a Web presence amplifies the demand for reference and access instead of serving merely as a surrogate” (Howard, Stephens Buie & Hanaford Purcell, 2009, p. 129). Certainly it cannot be denied that these projects make great use of library resources and material from other cultural centres. Therefore, the library should retain its central position in such projects because “[a]t the heart of many digital humanities collections is significant multimedia content sourced from libraries, museums and archives” (Mattison, 2006, p. 34). The involvement of the library in all aspects of the creation of digital humanities can ensure that the library receives adequate representation and recognition that will further ensure the integrity of the library’s role.

The second challenge facing libraries in terms of digital humanities projects, and electronic content in general, is that of

preservation. Projects created outside the library by scholars may be handed to the library with the expectation that this work, as with other scholarly material, should be collected, maintained and preserved by the library. Libraries thus recommend that creators work directly with their library from the outset of a project to ensure that certain standards and preservation guidelines are adhered to (Smith, 2003). The disconnect between libraries and scholars appears because “authors do not like to be inhibited by such parameters, and they do not like to create the amount of metadata required for preservation” (Smith, 2003, p. 9). Here it can be seen that although the concerns of the scholar and the librarian may be different, the concerns should be viewed as valid by each side. Aptly put by Rydberg-Cox (2006):

Surely, there is much about digital librarianship that will not be of concern to many computational humanists while much digital work in the humanities is not immediately relevant to the work of librarians. The two fields cannot, however, simply ignore each other. (p. 17).

Linda Cantara (2006) advocates for tools and automated measures that will help preserve the projects of digital humanists: “consultation with a librarian or an information scientist with knowledge of preservation metadata standards early in a project is as essential as computer programming support” (p. 40). Indeed, preservation seems to emerge as a significant challenge that libraries struggle to resolve. However, it is only through massive collaboration and the development of international metadata standards that today’s

current projects might hope to remain relevant and accessible beyond the immediate future.

The third challenge facing libraries is the management and dissemination of digital scholarly content. Most large research institutions have implemented institutional repositories for capturing, maintaining and distributing scholarly work. As such repositories are designed for the addition of files such as MS Word documents or PDF files, they often do not meet the needs of digital humanists creating digital tools. In respect to institutional repositories, we can also see a great difference in priorities between librarians and scholars. The ‘adoption problem’ with institutional repositories was first coined in a 2005 article by Nancy Foster and Susan Gibbons (as cited in Rydberg-Cox, 2006, p. 87). In their article, Foster and Gibbons pointed out that even the MIT repository had low participation by faculty, despite the fact that the project employed a full-time specialist and a marketing team to encourage its use (Rydberg-Cox, 2006). Foster and Gibbons also identified a “fundamental disconnect” between the priorities that librarians and faculty held toward the features and functionality of digital libraries and repositories, and suggested that repositories would likely be met with indifference or outright aversion by faculty (Rydberg-Cox, 2006). Aside from institutional repositories, libraries also need to effectively market and integrate in-house, subscription based and web based digital resources to its user groups, including faculty and students, and within the university curriculum.

Examples of Effective Collaboration

Some projects and universities are partnering together faculty and libraries successfully to enhance awareness of digital humanities projects. Information literacy, the teaching of information skills to students, is an important responsibility of the academic library and usually focuses on basic skills for undergraduate students. At Northwestern University, information literacy is delivered in relation to digital humanities. The university's "Introduction to Electronic Resources/Humanities Computing Training Day" (now titled "Electronic Resources Forum") is a mandatory day of sessions for humanities and social sciences doctoral students (Lightman & Reingold, 2005; "Electronic Resources Forum (ERF)", 2009). This training day was initiated in partnership with the university library; sessions were taught by pairs of librarians and faculty and showcased digital resources and projects to students. Reflecting on this collaborative effort, a librarian and dean involved in the training explained that sessions featured both a librarian and a faculty member, so that students "could see database mechanics as well as first-hand examples of the ways in which electronic resources were put to serious scholarly use" (Lightman & Reingold, 2005, p. 28). This collaborative approach highlights the strengths of library and researcher as it engages a new generation of students in the potential and possibilities of new modes of scholarly research.

A second example of effective faculty and library collaboration is the Pzena Collection

of Illuminated Manuscript Leaves at the University of Louisville. This collection was inspired by a new faculty member eager to collaborate with the Rare Book Library at the university and involved the digitization of part of the library collection (Howard, Stephens Buie & Hanaford Purcell, 2009). As part of the digital content, two librarians wrote accompanying lesson plans for the K-12 curriculum as well as introductory essays for context, while another librarian created the home page (Howard, Stephens Buie & Hanaford Purcell, 2009). In this case, the collection was initiated by faculty but carried out by the library with faculty input. The addition of new content created by the librarians showcases the editorial role that can be taken to widen access to digital collections by providing instructional support and research context.

While these examples provide context for the institutional role of the library in collaborative projects, it is also interesting to explore the work of librarians themselves in terms of initiating digital projects. First, it is worth noting that in the premier issue of the Humanist listserv (May 14th, 1987) the following definition of "digital humanist" was provided: "people who support computing in the humanities. Those who teach, review software, answer questions, give advice, program, write documentation, or otherwise support research and teaching in this area are included" (as cited in Mattison, 2006, p. 27). This definition seems to include the librarian. However, as recently as February 2009, Willard McCarty has posted to the Humanist listserv questioning the stalled

development of the librarian as equal in the research process. McCarty cites a New York Times Literary Supplement from 1971 that argued for the equal position of librarians and realises that little has changed since that time. While McCarty may be disappointed in the progress of librarians, there are many examples of effective and equitable collaboration that may serve as inspiration and guidance for librarians as they work toward achieving a research role in individual institutions.

An often cited project with librarians as contributors is the development of Zotero, the citation management tool at the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University (Mavrinnac, 2008). Zotero may be defined as a digital humanities tool. According to Smith (2003), an important feature of “new-model scholarship is a blurring between ‘collections’ and ‘services’ and between research ‘information’ and research ‘tools’” (p. 11). It seems logical to propose that since the creation of such tools can be considered new scholarship (according to digital humanists), librarians may therefore have a stake in not only supporting research, but in its creation as well.

Another example of librarian involvement in faculty research is represented by the publication of a collection of essays in 2009 titled *Digital Scholarship*¹. This publication presents a series of papers on the field of digital collections and research. In the preface to the

collection, Christine Borgman (2009) writes “While much has been written of late on the need for digital scholarship in the humanities, the examples that exist are mostly written by and for scholars. These chapters are written by librarians and archivists, all of whom are actively engaged in building digital collections and are working closely with scholars and students” (p. vii). This collection provides ample details into a dozen digital humanities projects from the perspectives of library collaborators.

In a 2008 survey of digital humanities centres in the United States, Diane Zorich identifies key contributors to research and computing centres. Among the categories of staff she identifies are Information Technology, Library, Archives, and Information Science, and Research and Scholarship (p. 15). From this survey, it is apparent that formalized digital humanities projects that have status in universities make use of a range of expertise in the institution. Though librarians may not initiate digital humanities projects independently (as has been the case with scholars), Zorich points out that a “small but growing” number of fellowships have been made available to non-academic professionals including librarians collaborating with digital humanities scholars, a group previously ignored for such honours (p. 21).

With these developments and with librarians eager to participate, libraries are well positioned to continue to expand their current roles in the creation and distribution of content through collaboration and partnerships with faculty. Wendy Pradt Lougee argues that

¹ Deyrup, M. M. (Ed.), (2009). *Digital scholarship*. New York: Routledge.

librarians are involved as constructors of tools and services and as “contributor[s] to knowledge creation”, and that the library can move beyond its role as simply a collection or service to become a “diffuse agent” in scholarship and the research community (as cited in Mavrincac, 2008). Further, a February 2009 survey by Richard Cunningham of Acadia University and Lynne Siemens of the University of Victoria asks: “Are you a librarian supporting researchers?” and focuses on the humanities computing/digital humanities context (Warwick, 2009). The results of this survey may prove invaluable to realizing the effort put forth by librarians in the research environment.

In contrast to the Literatures in English blog post where the writer wondered why he or she was often the only librarian in the room, a post from March 2009 on the HUMlab Blog claimed that over one hundred librarians were attending a session on humanities computing (Hendrick, 2009). Further, a panel of speakers including librarians discussed their thoughts on the following questions: “What is the role for libraries in creating and supporting the cyberinfrastructure for humanities research?; What do researchers need from libraries to enable digital humanities scholarship?” at the recent New Directions in Digital Humanities Scholarship symposium at the University of Illinois (Raineri et al., 2009). These research interests indicate that the collaboration between faculty and librarians on digital humanities projects is not a fleeting concern, but is a subject worthy of research in and of itself. It is new proposals such as these that will keep the

concerns of librarians in the forefront and hopefully foster positive attitudes and new opportunities for collaborative projects.

Conclusion

The scholar and the library have a long tradition together. The perceptions and attitudes of scholars and librarians may be different; the two groups may misunderstand each other. However, this historical relationship serves as a foundation on which to build new methods of collaboration and cooperation. The discipline of digital humanities provides the intersection of resources, technology and research that may serve as the impetus to making collaboration between researchers and libraries a necessity and a priority, rather than an exception. The library’s rich resources, expertise in collection management and preservation, and motivation to support research interests provides a fertile ground for humanities researchers to explore digital scholarship. The questions of the future of the library and the future of the book have long been asked and remain unanswered. However, focusing scholarship on these issues, collaborating to ensure that best practices are met by scholars and libraries in digital humanities projects, and advocating for cooperation across disciplines will ensure that these questions continue to be asked.

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