

Article Title: Subject Librarian as Co-Author: A Case Study with Recommendations

Abstract:

It can be challenging for subject librarians to participate in or lead Digital Humanities projects. This article presents a case study of a cataloging and digitization project that led to the creation of a Digital History website, both led by a subject librarian. Recommendations, such as leveraging your librarian skills and targeting graduate students, will be useful for other subject librarians who are looking for ways to become involved in the Digital Humanities.

Keywords: project development, embedded librarian, graduate students, subject liaison, digital humanities

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Main Text:

Introduction:

In this article, the author will discuss her experience as a subject librarian building on a traditional library-centered cataloging and digitization project to become a co-author of a popular digital history website. The original project, [*Revealing la Révolution*](#), kicked off in 2012 and has resulted in nearly 1,800 cataloged and 1,000 digitized pamphlets available through the Internet Archive that have been used in classes at the University of Maryland (UMD) and other institutions. The digital history site, [*A Colony in Crisis: The Saint-Domingue Grain Shortage of 1789*](#), has gained a strong following among digital humanists and Caribbean scholars, clearing 19,000 views from ninety different countries in mid-2017 after just over two years of traffic. The lessons learned along the way, detailed in this essay, will be valuable for other subject librarians looking to get involved with Digital Humanities work.

Context and Background:

The University of Maryland Libraries Special Collections holds a significant number of items (both secondary and primary sources) in French. Lore has it that back in the 1950s when funding was abundant, a special collections librarian flew off to France and bought out a rare bookstore that was closing. This windfall included many boxes of French pamphlets, dating from the 17th to the 20th century. Since that time, several librarians have led efforts to make these pamphlets more accessible, producing a box-level finding aid ("French Pamphlet Collection" 2017) and a smattering of fully-cataloged pamphlets. French-language proficiency of UMD Libraries staff was a challenge, though, which led to some involvement from the French department in those early initiatives. Few people around campus were aware of the collection; items were occasionally requested from the closed stacks, but, by-and-large, use of the UMD French Pamphlet Collection was rather low in comparison to other special collections. There was talk of digitizing the pamphlets to make them more discoverable, but as only a few were

fully cataloged, it would not have been possible within standard workflows at that time. Interest was revived in 2012 through a confluence of events, namely, a special collections tour when the author was hired as a French subject librarian and the emergence of the French Pamphlet Planning Project, an NEH-funded planning grant led by the University of Florida libraries that focused on pamphlets held in United States libraries.

Globally, libraries have been involved in what we now refer to as the Digital Humanities (DH) for decades (Sula 2013). The University of Maryland is no exception. The Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH) was founded in 1999 as a joint effort between the College of Arts and Humanities and the University Libraries (MITH 2017). MITH has its physical home in the Libraries. Dual appointments such as that of the Associate Director of MITH and Libraries Assistant Dean for Digital Humanities Research are designed to further strengthen the connection between the two entities. While the UMD Libraries had a desire to “do something” with the French pamphlets for many years, the initial project idea for *Revealing la Révolution* was conceived during the first iteration of the MITH-led Digital Humanities Incubator, a “program of workshops, tutorials, “office hours,” and project consultations intended to help introduce library faculty, staff, and graduate assistants to digital humanities” (Muñoz 2012). The Incubator offered workshops on project development, finding data, and proposal building that directly informed our first steps in *Revealing la Révolution*.

Librarian collaboration in a DH project comes about, in some cases, when a faculty member approaches the Libraries, looking for assistance with aspects of a project (Posner 2012). These faculty-driven efforts most frequently revolve around specific services (bibliographic and literature review work, as one example). *Revealing la Révolution* inverted this typical pattern of development. As subject librarian, the author was made aware that our library held a significant collection and that there was national interest in French pamphlets. Given the author’s lack of special collections experience (e.g., could not read a finding aid), it became immediately apparent that a team approach would be necessary to evaluate our holdings before

cataloging and digitizing them. Appropriate colleagues from Special Collections and Metadata Services were recruited to join the project team. Our team recognized that we needed French-language subject expertise to assist with prioritizing the pamphlets and understanding the community of scholars and their needs once pamphlets were digitized.

Two of the strongest Library proponents in the French Department were natural partners for *Revealing la Révolution*: one specializing in Francophone literature, and the other specializing in eighteenth-century French literature. The three of us collaborated on an application to the College of Arts and Humanities (ARHU) for \$5,000 in funding to hire French students to inventory the pamphlets. Our French faculty collaborators recommended several students to hire for the inventory portion of the project. Our Metadata Librarian provided initial training, and we drafted a procedures manual and planned out a workflow for inventorying. The students added notes to the inventory highlighting topics of interest to the project, which helped prioritize selections for cataloging, digitization, and blogging. We employed a total of four different students over one and a half years, and ended up with an inventory of over four thousand pamphlets that allowed for copy-cataloging rather than painstaking original cataloging of eighteenth century foreign language material. Once cataloged, the pamphlets could easily be incorporated into our existing Internet Archive digitization workflow. After eighteen months, we had cataloged and digitized almost one thousand pamphlets.

Prior to work commencing, two project librarians were funded by the UMD Libraries to attend the Project Development course at the inaugural Digital Humanities Winter Institute in January 2013 to gain expertise to support the project. Completing that course contributed directly to the success of the *Revealing la Révolution* project, and later, *A Colony in Crisis*. Instructors spent forty hours teaching us the ways of Digital Humanities Project Development. The syllabus included topics such as “Formulating disciplinary questions as research ideas,” “Best practice principles of designing your first project,” Principles of Workplan Development,” “Designing your publicity campaign,” and “Evaluating your project and team members” (Guiliano

and Appleford 2013). When ARHU awarded funding, we were poised to move forward by having drafted our workplan and developed the workflow process elucidated above. Importantly, our workplan assisted us in making efficient and effective use of our student workforce. We actually used less funding than expected to reach our target cataloging and digitization goals, which enabled us to use leftover funding to broaden our project's reach. The project team elected to develop a parallel pedagogical resource that would push the pamphlets into classrooms and expose students to primary sources and archival research.

Digital History Project:

[insert Image 1]

[Caption: *A Colony in Crisis* homepage]

In focusing on pedagogical use of the French pamphlets, our project was fulfilling three parallel, but independent, goals: 1) it assisted faculty in their teaching efforts by preparing contextual materials to the pamphlets for use in their classrooms; 2) it met a key strategic goal of the UMD Libraries, which seek to support the core educational mission of the institution; and 3) it broadened our potential outreach by providing an easily-accessible aggregated resource that could serve as a model for further partnerships. A graduate student employee working on the project since its inception had a strong interest in pedagogy and involving undergraduate students in archival research. Recalling a resource used in an undergraduate class (a translated document reader from the Bedford Series in History & Culture entitled, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean* eds. Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus), the student suggested that we model this document reader approach in the online environment. This provided students with a short historical context and an excerpt of an original primary source, in our case, a translation of one of the French pamphlets we had identified during *Revealing la Révolution*.

An Assistant Director at MITH with significant experience teaching undergraduates and who had been involved in both the Incubator program and the Project Development course consulted to help us finalize details such as: the word count for each document (how long is the

average undergraduate attention span for online materials?), how to select pamphlets for inclusion in the reader (chronologically? Location-based? Surrounding a particular event?), as well as practical concerns such as how many pamphlets should be included in the resource. The graduate student employee spent countless hours poring over pamphlets and came away with the Grain Shortage of 1789 as the specific event to guide our document selection.

Two early happenings positioned the project for success. One, we created a [Board of Advisors](#) who could assist in providing feedback on the project, serve as emissaries to their scholar networks, and provide gravitas to the nascent project. Whether it was our digital approach, topic selection, or the smoothly running project that appealed to them, many marquee scholars in Haitian and Caribbean Studies agreed to serve on the Board of Advisors. Each member reviewed one of the translated documents, providing expert feedback and giving us a measure of scholarly credibility that two French Studies Master's students and a subject librarian could never have garnered on our own.

Additionally, the UMD Libraries provided funding for the author to attend the Crowdsourcing Cultural Heritage Course at the second iteration of the Digital Humanities Winter Institute, renamed Humanities Intensive Learning and Teaching, in August 2014. While the primary focus of that class was, of course, crowdsourcing, instructors covered invaluable web development topics such as "Best Practices in Design" and an "Overview of lightweight and guerrilla usability testing" ("Crowdsourcing Cultural Heritage" 2014). We had been tremendously successful in processing the UMD French pamphlets; however, the national French Pamphlets Project potentially involved tens of thousands of items that would need to be processed with limited resources. Crowdsourcing could offer one way to complete the cataloguing, digitization, and contextualization workflow that we had established as part of our project.

An important deliverable of the crowdsourcing class was an education in usability testing and audience response. The beta version of *A Colony in Crisis* served as a guinea pig for the class and the testing to which it was subjected that week improved the final product by several

orders of magnitude. We changed the menu titles to be more intuitive for users, changed the layout of the document/translation page and tightened up the text on the home page, among many other adjustments. As guerrilla usability testing would further improve the functionality of the site, the author recorded colleagues as they took a very brief usability test, and utilized their feedback to address issues before our initial release in September 2014. A second deliverable of the class was an understanding of how use the popular Wikisource platform, the community-driven Internet project promoting primary sources. Following the course, we began adding our scanned pamphlets to Wikisource allowing users around the world to correct the completed optical character recognition results of the texts. This led to a higher rate of accuracy of full-text transcriptions. It also enabled further digital humanities approaches to our project such as text analysis and mining, which could work across plain text versions of the documents to identify themes and conduct natural language processing tasks like personography. It is our hope that these approaches gain traction as the project matures.

Since our first issue went live in 2014, we have added two more issues of translated pamphlets and a set of background notes created by undergraduate students for a final project in a 2015 French Studies class. The site has received over 19,000 pageviews by visitors from ninety different countries. Several digital humanities classes list *A Colony in Crisis* as required reading on their syllabi. By keeping a close eye on our Wordpress statistics, we have been able to track our impact quantitatively through pageviews and link referrers. Further, we have completed a number of associated tasks that were key to our larger success: written scholarly blog posts; presented at key conferences such as the Caribbean Studies Association and Caribbean Digital III; and written several book chapters and articles. Overall, the project has been an enormous success with continued potential for growth.

[insert Image 2]

[Caption: Translated document page from *A Colony in Crisis*]

Recommendations:

While those of us who have worked on *Revealing la Révolution* and *A Colony in Crisis* could offer much advice for those who are embarking upon a similar journey, the recommendations below are designed for others in subject librarian roles who are wondering how to actively contribute to a digital humanities project.

Leverage your strengths as a librarian, and advocate for yourself as an important participant in the project (Zhang, Liu, and Mathews 2015, 371). Librarians are skilled collaborators (Siemens et al. 2011). Depending on how your project comes together, you may need to challenge perceptions of what a librarian does on a DH project. Librarian contributions can sometimes be discounted as administrative support or project management (Belzowski, Ladwig, and Miller 2013), which somehow seems to have a negative connotation among faculty. Those duties (the project manager or digitization specialist, for example) are often relegated to second-class status in the project in terms of both credit and authority. However, your knowledge of materials, understanding of library collections, expertise in cataloging and library workflows, and connections with other institutions will be invaluable for your project. As the project director on the first issue of *A Colony in Crisis*, the author reached out through subject librarian contacts in the Western European Studies Section of the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) to recruit our first Advisory Board members. Further, librarians are typically much more comfortable with collaborative work than humanities scholars, who are accustomed to solo research project (Siemens et al. 2011, 345). Your ability to work successfully as part of a team may be one of your most important contributions.

Get on Twitter. No, really, GET ON TWITTER. Scheinfeldt (2010), Ross et al. (2011), and Holmberg and Thelwall (2014) have stressed the importance of Twitter for Digital

Humanities. We missed out on crucial engagement opportunities with the debut of the first issue of *A Colony in Crisis* by not taking enough advantage of Twitter. We thought of our project as of local interest first with the external community being something we would address later. Yet, with the National French Pamphlets project and the rapid dissemination of our first issue, we quickly realized that media (social or otherwise) would be essential. Subsequent stages of the project went live with a prepared hashtag (#ColonyinCrisis) and featured [tweets about the project](#) on our homepage, which we then captured through [Storify](#). We have also taken advantage of other key hashtags such as #HaitiSyllabus and #VastEarlyAmerica that have given us reach beyond our Advisory Board members and their networks. Others have recommended joining Twitter to fully participate in the DH community (Vandegrift and Varner 2013, 73), which the *Colony in Crisis* experience strongly supports.

Find your personal niche within the project. As a subject librarian having very limited experience with digitization, special collections, or, for that matter, French, the author was initially very apprehensive about taking the lead on *Revealing la Révolution*. However, by leveraging five years of project management experience in the private sector, the project team achieved measurable successes in a short period of time and colleagues were inspired to adopt project management techniques improving their workflows. A strong interest in website development proved invaluable during *A Colony in Crisis*. Think about what skills you have, even if they are not part of your regular subject librarian day job, which will allow you to carve out an important role in the project. Every project has dozens of potential areas of contribution (project management, finance, website, press and media, pedagogical development, graphic design, etc) where a librarian might take the lead.

Be prepared for your role to shift over time. When we started *A Colony in Crisis*, the author served as project director, creating workflows, communicating with reviewers, setting timelines, managing email traffic, and building the website from scratch. Graduate students were very involved in topic and pamphlet selection as well as the work of translating the documents. One year later, when it was time to prepare our second issue of translated documents, that level of involvement was simply no longer possible due to competing professional priorities. One of the graduate students working on *A Colony in Crisis* assumed many project director responsibilities, communicating with reviewers and managing workflows. We have maintained this arrangement through subsequent issues, and that student has become the main face of the project. He has strong connections with the Caribbean Studies community, and is the project's voice on Twitter. He has also leveraged the skills and network developed through *A Colony in Crisis* for other DH and Caribbean Studies projects.

Target Graduate Students. While faculty support was crucial for getting the *Revealing la Révolution* project off the ground, graduate students did the majority of the work on that project, inventorying pamphlets and writing blog posts to connect web visitors with their work, and they have taken the lead on *A Colony in Crisis*. Graduate students in the humanities tend to be engaged library users (Gibbs et al. 2012, 271) and may be more likely to have developed a relationship with their subject librarian. Graduate students are also interested and motivated, as Cordell et al explain: "Graduate students who may be curious about DH as a field, as well as anxious that being left out could hamper their chances on the job market, are often keeping their eyes open for ways to become involved in digital scholarship" (2015, 68). Their research primarily recommends instruction and consultations to train up graduate students in these digital skills, but also suggest including graduate students on library-driven Digital Humanities projects

(Cordell et al., 77), just as we have done with *A Colony in Crisis*. We have learned through attempted marketing to campus faculty members that many have narrowed in on such a specific topic that it can be hard to involve them in digital projects that may have been rendered tangential by that specialization. Graduate students are frequently still finalizing their research agenda, and, therefore, are often more willing to try something new and different. They also tend to be more comfortable with the collaborative research models necessary for successful DH projects. Finally, even for those graduate students who are not considering an Alt-Ac (Alternative-Academic) career, the skills they learn (i.e. Zotero) are transferrable to the dissertation process and also their transition into a faculty role (i.e. Twitter).

Be official. Even though robust project management seems to take a lot of time, the extra effort is well worth it in the long run, as your team will work better together and you will be more likely to complete the stated goals of your project in a reasonable time frame. We drafted an official workplan, documented our file structure, wrote press releases, assigned official roles to each project team member, tracked “in-kind” time spent on the project, carried out mid- and end-of-project evaluations, held regularly scheduled meetings, and drafted blog posts. This lent an official air to the project, even though it started as an internally funded, less glamorous cataloging and digitization project.

[insert Image 3]

[Caption: Google Drive project folder structure]

We also took a more official approach to website development for *A Colony in Crisis*, as instructed in the 2014 Crowdsourcing Cultural Heritage class, which has paid off. When *A Colony in Crisis* was reviewed in the inaugural issue of *sx archipelagos*,

Eller noted that “The site is eminently accessible for and welcoming to new users and is also well designed, with built-in link redundancies for excellent navigation between documents, explanations, and the rest of the project” (2016, 3).

Get trained (or train yourself) by seeking out opportunities such as a DH Incubator or the training courses offered by HILT on topics such as Project Development and Crowdsourcing Cultural Heritage. Take the time to learn on your own, especially about the subject domain and any technical skills you or your partners may be lacking. “For librarians with an interest in DH/DS projects, it will be essential to be open and seek out new training and learning opportunities” (Tzoc 2016, 134). Also, stay open to learning **during** the project. The author, in her first experience supervising other employees, quickly learned to specify expectations in advance regarding things like turnaround time for email responses and any “extra” work expected of staff. As the project plan included feedback mechanisms such as staff surveys, quickly addressing issues identified through those mechanisms improved the employee experience and led to increased dedication to the project.

Build your network: Most Digital Humanities projects require expertise from many different technical and subject domains (Siemens 2009). Start by reaching out to colleagues within your library. In a large organization, there will likely be enough moving parts in any digital project that colleagues from multiple divisions and departments will need to be involved. In our case, the primary project team for *Revealing la Révolution* included representatives from Public Services, Special Collections, and Metadata services. We also frequently consulted with colleagues in Digital Systems and Stewardship (IT). Our team came together easily with administrator support. In some environments, however, that support may not always be available. Information

Technology or Metadata Services may not be used to working directly with Public Service Librarians, or vice versa. Building those relationships will reap benefits for the organization as a whole. After building our internal team, the next outreach opportunity was the French department. Our faculty collaborators put us in touch with students to work on the project, but also mentioned the experience to colleagues, increasing interest in our French Special Collections. Professional organizations were next. Think broadly about which entities would have an interest in your project and keep them apprised of your work as opportunities may present themselves down the road.

Finally, expand to domain and DH experts around the world. Your faculty collaborators will be very helpful in this phase. You will want that expert feedback, but that is also the group who is most likely to use the resources you make available through your project. Looping them in early, offering them ways to get involved (through a Board of Advisors, for example), and keeping them updated on your progress will drive up use and credibility of your resource.

Do what you can with the funding you can get. You may have noticed that aside from an internal seed grant and a small portion of funding allocated from the national French Pamphlet Planning Project, we have not applied for nor received external funding for either *Revealing la Révolution* or *A Colony in Crisis*. The majority of our support has come in the form of in-kind contributions from library administration, librarians, faculty members, and even the graduate students as *A Colony in Crisis* expanded. While we were initially able to pay our students on an hourly basis, after our initial funding was exhausted, those same students elected to continue working on a scholarly basis. By giving them appropriate credit and providing fringe benefits like networking, the work has been worth their while despite the lack of monetary remuneration. Nowviskie, an extremely well-known voice in the conversation surrounding DH and Libraries, states:

“Don’t assume you need a grant. How much can you get done without one? (You’ll be in better shape to ask for targeted support later.)”(2012)

Communications and marketing are nearly as important as the content itself. If

nobody knows about the amazing resources that you are making available through your project, then perhaps it is not worth all the time and energy. Subject librarians are likely to be familiar with this phenomenon. For example, if you have spent hours planning an amazing workshop that a mere four people attend, was it worth the time spent preparing? How could you have publicized that event to ensure a larger turnout?

Communicate early and often. Draft press releases, monthly reports, white papers, and blog posts to keep your target audience in the loop. Building a strong community around your project is crucial for achieving success with crowdsourcing, as participants need to understand how their contribution makes a difference and why they should continue what boils down to working for free. Based on the training we completed, we put maximum effort into communications from the very beginning of *Revealing la Révolution*. We put a press release on the Libraries’ news feed, the French Department’s website, as well as the College of Arts and Humanities homepage the moment we received funding. We submitted monthly reports to our sponsors and library administrators (due to the large amount of in-kind time spent on this project), and wrote blog posts once a month to inform others of the work that was being done on a daily basis.

While at times it felt like we were shouting into a void, our early publicity efforts began to get the word out and paved the way for our success with *A Colony in Crisis*. That is when we ramped up our marketing efforts to a different level. We created a shared spreadsheet tracking every listserv, website, blog, and even individual scholar who we thought might be interested in our work. By Issue 2.0, we were leveraging

Twitter in a much more productive way, and that medium proved to be most effective for engaging with both Digital Humanities and Caribbean Studies scholars.

Conclusion:

While you will perhaps find more examples of collaboration between Digital Humanists and the Digital Libraries crowd than with subject librarians, it is very possible for subject specialists to participate in and lead Digital Humanities projects, by leveraging the skills and networks you have developed as a subject librarian. You can expand your role in a project by seeking out training opportunities (even through informal channels such as Twitter, blog posts, and conference presentations), taking formal approaches whenever possible, and focusing on project communication. While you may not find yourself involved in a large grant-funded project right away, take advantage of whatever funding you can obtain to get your project off the ground, targeting graduate student collaborators who have a lot to gain from digital project work. Most importantly, look at these digital projects as an extension of your librarianship. They are not separate from our key interests but rather a step to further develop our subject expertise and amplify our outreach efforts.

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