Libraries Innovative Practices Forum

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Opportunities and Challenges Facing Librarians in the Digital Humanities

Slide –Opening Slide

In this presentation I will look at the challenges and opportunities for librarians and libraries as we support the growing field of Digital Humanities. I will discuss my experience as a digital humanist with my project *The Recusant Print Network Project* and my recent experience as both a content contributor and librarian DH consultant on the large-scale, grant funded project *Slavery, Law, & Power*. My goal is to lay out some observations from my experience, coupled with some external examples from the literature, to advocate for embedded librarians within digital humanities projects due to our diverse skills and positions within the research apparatus.

This is in no way complete and maybe we can discuss further examples in the questions/discussion portion

Slide --Outline

This short presentation comes at the heels of what has obviously been a difficult year in every possible way and represents, therefore, something of a stock-taking and a regrouping. Like most others, the limitations faced over the past year has made new research difficult, so I will be looking at addressing some central questions that librarians who support the digital humanities have been asking and applying my experience as a digital humanities researcher and as a support librarian to think about some core services and challenges on the horizon. This can be especially important since as a profession, librarians do tend to take on quite a bit, so taking a step back and reevaluating the best methods and practices for supporting DH can help us move forward in a potentially more impactful way by focusing on depth.

As I recently wrote for the journal of the Association of Documentary Editing, definitions of Digital Humanities, or DH, are as varied as the researchers working in the field. In fact, debates about the possibilities in DH, the purposes, and futures have been kicking around since the mid 70s. So, if DH is nothing new, why has it risen to prominence so visibly in the past decade? There is a long and complicated answer, of course, but one notion that tends to frequent the discussion is that of viability in humanities research in general and how digital technologies can provide something like a shot in the arm to traditional scholarship. DH should not be seen as a panacea, however, as traditional methods still dominate most humanities fields. This is one of the key takeaways that I will return to repeatedly as we think about challenges for librarians. Just as with traditional scholarship, the librarian's role, while important, is protracted as the scholars further develop their research. As I will discuss, DH tends to amplify traditional methods within humanities research and extends the scope analysis in ways not possible in other formats. The core of the disciplines, however, tend to remain and successful projects tend to be those who can answer deeper questions within their fields, not simply provide flashy graphics.

Slide –So What?

(1) I actually see this as one of the first opportunities for librarians as DH supporter: being able to help the researcher understand the "so what?" question surrounding their proposal. Speaking candidly, this can be something of a challenge depending on who the requestor or patron is. I have had personal experiences with scholars interested in DH, but who do not understand the need for a connection to a firm methodology. In other words, they want to have a DH project, but what they describe is not aided by digital technologies. The aim with DH is to enhance a project through the use of digital tools in a way that cannot be done with traditional methods. Similarly, some scholars approach DH as a neat add-on to their current work thinking that a website with images is "DH." I am in no way making fun of

these scholars, especially since increasingly humanities departments are demanding some form of digital scholarship to justify funding and many scholars have not had to think about these notions much in the past. That said, however, often these scholars do not understand the difficulties in using some of the tools, nor do they understand the actual use of them or how varied the applications can be. For example, TEI, which is the markup language of the Textual Encoding Initiative, is a way to add a metadata schema to an object, text, etc., with the explicit goal of utilizing it as a machine-readable object. In other words, to USE the object in some way through this encoded text. It has been my experience that many scholars have something of a convoluted understanding of what these notions are, how to make them work, and again, why the particular tool is necessary for the specific job.

My first role in supporting the digital humanities was in a previous position when I was at McDaniel College. The head of the Art History department and I were friends and colleagues working on a *Reacting to the Past* game experience and we got to chatting while at a conference about the possibilities of digital humanities for art history. This project, which I agreed to help support as best as I could, started with a central problem she wanted to address: her undergraduate students had a hard time picturing the dispersal of tropes and the frequency of common images and iconography in the late Byzantine and early Medieval Mediterranean. Specifically, her expertise was with the common Madonna and Child, and she wanted to demonstrate regional, temporal, stylistic, etc. differences in paintings across a span of time and space. In working with the professor through the DH literature of the time, we worked out that her project would be most appropriate as a map – one where we could slide between years, works, and artists. The professor worked with the Google Maps API and developed a nifty teaching tool; one that we were able to workshop and use for protolyzing with other faculty of the college. What made this project successful was the direct purpose it had. The professor needed something that traditional methods –notably the carousel of slides

familiar to art history students—didn't achieve well enough. This was a valuable lesson for me, too, as it taught me the importance of being a reliable and dedicated consultant and the value of having skin in the game, so to speak

SLIDE -Discipline Agnostic

(2) Another value that librarians can add is that most librarians who support the digital humanities do so with a more or less discipline agnostic approach and can more easily see the wider landscape of dh research while avoiding the entrenchments found within individual approaches. In other words, a graduate student's advisor may only know of a narrow band of projects stemming from conferences, articles, etc. from within their discipline (e.g. historians familiar with digital history projects, literature scholars with literature projects, etc.). Curiously, however, one factor to consider is the extent to which our own area of focus as librarians leads us to developing or advising projects towards our own disciplinary biases. A recent special issue of College & Undergraduate Libraries (2017) organized by Christopher Millson-Martula and Kevin Gunn discussed the multiple ways librarians can be involved with digital humanities projects, and many of the projects described were variations on displays or ways to access text. Through my own DH projects and through my own thinking and justifications for the practice, I do think a focus on access and discovery is one of the more valid *raison d'etre* for such initiatives, but again I'm speaking from my own intellectual entrenchments as a historian and a librarian. I will elaborate on further interdisciplinary methods below, but it is important to note that because librarians are more likely to be conversant in the digital humanities, as opposed to only digital history, etc. we can advise students to take a more un-anchored approach. For example, text mining is less common in digital history than it is in literature studies. But, of course, this doesn't mean that it doesn't have value in history. It depends on the question being addressed. To that end, it is also helpful to take this wider-view when working with students in related disciplines such as

Classics or Anthropology as their work could veer into different or multi-method approaches. Further still, undergraduate students who are learning about digital humanities often have far less interest in the set methodologies within disciplines and have likely been exposed to mixed methods through many of their classes.

Slide -- Connections

(3) connections: Because librarians occupy an interesting position on campuses, we are often more likely to be aware of projects, research, and people outside of an individual's scope. Where this can be particularly important as a subject librarian is looking even outside of the general scope of the humanities to seek inspiration. This is not a novel approach in general as humanists have sought new methods from disciplines like psychology, sociology, anthropology, and more in the past. Famously, scholars associated with the *l'école des annales* or the Annales School such as Lucian Febvre, Marc Bloch, and others turned to a quantitative study of history in order to change the lens on what could be seen as important in a historical narrative. In the general histography, the epochal turns, such as the social turn, the linguistic turn, the turn to the studies of mentalities, and more each essentially reflect the discipline looking to the social sciences and related disciplines to understand how the insights of these fields can benefit the study of history. The same too, can largely be said of literature studies and the development of critical theory. Digital Humanities, in this vein, can be seen as something of both a digital "turn" but also a direction reflecting these traditional methods of incorporating outside approaches to the study. Librarians by nature and by increasing need are also inter-and-or-multidisciplinary in approach and can advise students and researchers on methods being used in other fields of research as a way to help solve the "so what" aspects of DH.

Slide – TRPNP

As a brief example, my own research project, called the Recusant Print Network Project, started at a bibliometrics conference at the National Library of Medicine a few years ago. I had a vague sense that I wanted to begin a DH project, but I didn't yet have a problem to investigate, just some general questions. While working through the workshop elements of bibliometrics and beginning to use software to develop visualizations and charts based on this data, I had an inspiration for my own project. I had previously created what many historians create which is a basic spreadsheet of stuff. This stuff represented the output of English Recusants, illegally practicing Catholics during periods when that was not a good thing to be.

Slide – Edmund Campion

I began to think about the possibilities of displaying data as the core method of analysis to look at specific questions surrounding this period.

Slide a chart

Namely, how much of this illegal literature was printed in England despite previous historiographical claims that it could only have come out of continental sources? Paired with some advice in data modelling and data visualization from a faculty contact in psychology, I developed a project that incorporated multiple disciplinary approaches to address a central historical question. Again, all of this is to serve the main point that librarians sit at this intersection on campus that allows for dabbling and cross-pollination, and we can advertise this point well as it relates to methodologies and the development of new projects.

Slide – Research Knowledge

(4) This knowledge about research practices makes us a valuable member of a Digital Humanities team because it allows the librarian the latitude to work with the project team to help develop the right project to address central research questions. Additionally, the general research knowledge that a librarian has regarding organization, best practices, bibliographical management software and more can be a great help; especially if the project employs

students. Teaching librarians have the opportunity in these projects to use our instruction skills in new settings where we can connect Framework concepts regarding information value and IP rights among other important aspects. Additionally, our valuable skills in searching and locating resources, knwoeldge of the organizing structures underlying the myrid information architectures, and our knowledge about the publishing industry and practices are welcome help to developing DH projects. At Maryland, we are fortunate to have colleagues at MITH who can further all of these connections and strategies for the benefit of the project team.

Slide – Technical stuff

(5) Closely associated with our research skills are our technical proficiencies and skills in things like grant writing and administrative aspects of projects such as project management, data management, and general knowledge about the support infrastructure of ours and other universities. As Hitoshi Kamada wrote in 2010, librarians also bring a knowledge of organization, metadata, and controlled vocabularies which, as we all know, can both obscure and illuminate aspects of research. As all DH researchers come to find, these project bloat and take up a huge amount of time on things not typically thought about at the project's origin. This is especially true when seeking grant funding. Typically, granting agencies are seeking projects that understand the central importance of the question they are seeking to address, the rationalization of the methods proposed, and importantly how the money will be spent, an understanding of how to develop a project, and how to ensure data integrity from the inception through the end of life of the project. Because librarians are well versed in the administrative apparatus of the university and are sometimes, and I'll trod lightly here, more accustomed to the requirements of stakeholders in terms of writing funding proposals, budget justifications, and more we can easily demonstrate value as we can help teams identify tools like DMP Tool for grant applications, LucidChart for data management diagrams, and more.

Slide—SL&P

Specifically, some work that I have done for the large-scale, but developing DH project

Slavery, Law, and Power has included most of these things. Additionally, I have helped in the

development of the TEI schema we are planning to use, added my experience with Omeka to

the mix, and developed the data management plan and illustration

Slide—DMP Illustration

In my experience and through the discussions at some recent DH conferences and events I

have attended, this can also be an area of some frustration as researchers may not understand

your experience and tend to learn some lessons the hard way – told ya so. A good chapter on

the close-ties between scholars and technologists is our colleague Joe Koivisto's and his co-

authors' "Bridging the Gap: Managing a Digital Medieval Initiative Across Disciplines and

Institutions" as well as our former colleague Kelsey Corlett-Rivera's "Lessons from a Colony

in Crisis."

Slide -- challenges

I'm phrasing what could be seen as somewhat simplistic notions in this way because

there are significant challenges facing the DH support librarian. As DH continues to enter the

research stream, the familiarity with projects has greatly increased and therefore librarians

must keep ahead of the curve in areas we can. This is largely evident in the relevant literature

in this area. Many publications looking at librarian support for DH focus on easily phase

education about DH as opposed to the longer term and embedded components. There are, in a

sense, two separate audiences for librarian support in these areas: 1) as a force for educating

students and faculty about DH and some of the benefits, and 2) as a project-affiliate or

consultant working on specific elements of a project. Looking at larger scale DH projects

such as the *Six Degrees of Francis Bacon* you can see a large team supporting very specific

aspects of the project. There are programmers, web developers, historians, literary scholars,

and librarians working to both facilitate research in a classic sense and to help further the projects goals as a HD project. I think this is actually a rather important element to return to; this notion of a research consultant in both the literature of the discipline and facilitating needs with traditional research and in aiding in the developmental research in the innovative methods. DH projects are difficult and extraordinarily time consuming for the researchers, especially in the early phases, and I can speak from experience that this can lead to the core research goals being left to languish somewhat. A librarian on the team can help push innovation through something of a focus on the traditional backbone required for the intellectual project by aiding in the acquisition of material, working with archivists as liaisons, and understanding and removing research barriers as the project needs evolve. It is worth thinking from within a research project, too, in order to really determine what is needed from a librarian supporting a project.

From the other end of the equation, it is also important to consider what it is that researchers actually want from campus support. Again, this is not an official survey, but reflects my knowledge and observations from the field.

Slide – Subject knowledge

(1) Subject knowledge: Researchers, despite their best efforts, are entrenched in their research areas. This can often lead to some amount of difficultly describing the importance of their research to those outside of the field. As such, being able to understand and speak their language, as it were, is incredibly important in developing credibility as a librarian support consultant. This speaks to my earlier point that a cursory knowledge of DH is not likely enough to be an effective liaison in this area as most researchers will have a good deal of knowledge in this area as well. More to the point, however, it is most likely that researchers will approach librarians for specific requests for help as they formulate their project, but in the classic Rumsfeldian construction; they often don't know what they don't know making

this a perfect opportunity to engage and discuss the project scope, aims, methods, and similar projects – and the more technical aspects of those project to gauge their understanding of the programming, scripting, describing, graphing, computing, etc. needs of what they're discussing. This is also an area for collaboration with other librarians and/or departments such as MITH who can step-in. Intellectual humility is a key component here, I think.

Slide – Server and Webspace

(2) Server Space and webspace: Recently, one of the problems I have been addressing is some of the administrative issues surrounding project support; specifically with things like server space, and webspace for development and development with an eye towards scale. Again, without wanting to go into too many details, the project that I am working on currently has hit many roadblocks when it comes issues of storage and presentation that have entangled other projects as well. These are higher-level issues, however, that most librarians do not have much power in addressing; connections be-damned, at times. Finding creative solutions, however, is something that librarians have had to become very good at as budgets continue to shrink and resources become scarce.

Slide – tech pro

(3) Technical proficiency: as mentioned above, this is an area where librarians can truly shine as our education and background in data management, cataloguing, metadata, and other areas of information organization and systems give us a leg up in the development of most digital projects. Even if librarians aren't fluent in markup languages or schema, the understanding that these are important aspects of project development can greatly aid a project if researchers are unaware of how to approach such notions. Additionally, evolving notions of information equity, too, can be brought into these discussions in ways to help remedy aspects of offensively or otherwise obscuring elements of the study. This is definitely true of the Slavery, Law, and Power project that I am a part of, and serves as the basis of my portion of a

co-written essay with that group; that of the role of information structures in digital humanities.

Slide—Launch Pad

(4) Launch pad: As we've seen with the recent "Speaking of Digital Scholarship" talk hosted by Eric Lindquist as a spin-off of our "Speaking of Books" programme, there is great interest both within the libraries and within the general university community for these projects, and the library can serve, as it does with traditional scholarship as a terrific launching pad for gaining exposure. MITH, too, has done a terrific job launching many projects including *Colony in Crisis*, which was co-developed and supported by Kelsey Corlett-Rivera (a former librarian here, for those who are newer to the team).

Slide: Grants

(5) Money and grant support: Perhaps most importantly, however, projects are seeking money. Digital Humanities can be an extremely costly methodology for research. As a member of the project team, therefore, librarians must be worth their position and actively aid in the grant application process. Depending on the appropriateness of the application, this can be direct or indirect as needs must. With all of these notions, it is of course important to remember some of the limitations that we have. Often these projects have full-time researchers and or graduate student assistants spending a good deal of focused time on these projects. For librarians, of course, a given project represents some fraction of the day, not our full-time commitment – so understanding the difference in expectations is important for all involved. Ultimately, DH, like Open Science, Open Education, Open Access, and more provide us a way to demonstrate our skills and knowledges in a new way, and to advance research in our university community for departments, disciplines, and subjects we care deeply about. I hope the above criteria and justification go some way in helping to understand the potential for librarians to work along-side researchers in a robust way.

Slide -- END