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Digital Humanities

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Tim Bryson

Librarian for South Asian Studies and Religious Studies
Emory University

Miriam Posner

Mellon Postdoctoral Research Associate
Emory University

Alain St. Pierre

Humanities Librarian for European History and Philosophy
Emory University

Stewart Varner

Digital Scholarship Coordinator
Emory University



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SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The ARL escience survey in 2009 confirmed how profoundly and quickly technology has transformed research in the sciences. Research in the humanities is being transformed as well. Digital humanities is an emerging field which employs computer-based technologies with the aim of exploring new areas of inquiry in the humanities. Practitioners in the digital humanities draw not only upon traditional writing and research skills associated with the humanities, but also upon technical skills and infrastructure. A number of research institutions host digital scholarship centers or otherwise provide services to help researchers design, produce, disseminate, and maintain digital projects. These centers are often, but not always, located in libraries and incorporate library staff or services into their core programming. Other institutions provide similar services in a less centralized manner. Some services target specific disciplines; others are multidisciplinary. Some institutional initiatives, such as George Mason University's Center for History and New Media, are well established, while others are still in the planning phase.

This survey was specifically interested in digital scholarship centers or services that support the humanities (e.g., history, art, music, film, literature, philosophy, religion, etc.) The purpose of the survey was to provide a snapshot of research library experiences with these centers or services and the benefits and challenges of hosting them. It explored the organization of these services, how they are staffed and funded, what services they offer and to whom, what technical infrastructure is provided, whether the library manages or archives the digital resources produced, and how services are assessed, among other

questions. The survey was conducted between April 11 and May 13, 2011. Sixty-four of the 126 ARL members completed this survey for a response rate of 51%.

Ad Hoc Nature of Service

While a great many of the responding libraries do offer support for digital humanities, the survey indicates that they are still developing systematic policies and staffing models for this type of project. In many cases, libraries are piecing together resources from many departments to meet demand as it arises. A number of respondents described their digital humanities support as "a work in progress" or "in development."

Libraries are likewise developing staffing procedures to meet patrons' needs. While some libraries have staff dedicated to digital humanities, others call on IT staff and librarians as needs arise. Respondents repeatedly described librarians' roles in digital humanities projects as "ad hoc." A number of respondents indicated that their institutions were waiting to determine the full level and complexity of demand before fully staffing support for digital humanities.

Major Trends

While most respondents provide services supporting digital humanities projects, only five (8%) reported that their library hosts a center specifically dedicated to the field. Almost half of the respondents (30 or 48%) provide ad hoc services, and almost a quarter (15 or 24%) host a digital scholarship center that provides services to a number of disciplines including humanities. Only four (6%) reported that no digital scholarship services are offered at their institution, although one of these commented that service was scheduled to start in the fall of 2011.

Project Staffing

Most library staff support is improvised and depends on the needs of the specific project and the availability of related services in units outside the library. Only 18 respondents (35%) indicated they have any dedicated staff for DH projects, and while one of these reported 16 permanent staff available to support researchers, the majority have fewer than five. Dedicated staff is most often a digital scholarship or digital humanities librarian. Technologists, such as programmers and developers, are the next largest category. These 18 libraries also call on subject librarians, support staff, and others depending on project need.

Subject librarians are dedicated project staff at only three libraries, but this category is the most likely to be called upon on an ad hoc basis, followed closely by technologists. In comments about other categories of available library staff, about half mentioned including a metadata specialist, followed by media, preservation, and communication specialists. A few also mentioned design, instructional, repository, archivist, and scanning specialists.

Services and Support

The survey responses suggest that there is a strong desire for digital humanities projects to be closely affiliated with the library. For example, some respondents stated that they only support projects that use library collections, while others indicated that they want library staff to participate as partners in projects. This participation most commonly takes the form of high-level support such as consultations and project management for DH projects. Less frequently, there is technical support such as web development, encoding, and systems administration. Beyond that, support takes the form of traditional library activities such as instructional services, metadata support, and resource identification.

Hardware and Software

The responding libraries provide a variety of hardware and software to support DH projects. Scanners are provided almost universally, and well over half of the libraries provide image, video, and audio editing stations. Most of the libraries provide bibliographic management applications and content management

systems. A majority also provides GIS software and data analysis tools. In many cases these tools are available for self-service by researchers, though a few respondents pointed out that staff use the tools to support DH projects. A slim majority of respondents (25 or 52%) reported that their libraries provided dedicated space to use these tools for digital humanities projects. The size of this space ranges from 100 to 6,000 square feet and averages 1204 square feet. In most cases (16 or 70%), some part of the space is securable for working with sensitive datasets.

Service Users

A large majority of respondents (47 or 98%) reported that faculty may use digital humanities support services, while slightly fewer—though still a substantial majority—provide services to graduate students (41 or 85%) and post-doctoral or other affiliated researchers (37 or 77%). About two-thirds of the respondents (31 or 65%) provide services to undergraduate students. More than a quarter offers services to nonaffiliated researchers, particularly if they are collaborating with an affiliated faculty member.

Libraries employ a variety of methods to advertise their digital humanities support services. Respondents rely on communications from subject liaisons more than any other method, but library websites are also widely used. Half of the responding libraries use publications in print or electronic form to market services. Library staff also attend events, send direct email, and use social media to spread the word about these services.

Project Workspace

Library staff meet with researchers in a variety of spaces to plan or consult on DH projects. Staff offices are the most popular meeting spaces by far; 94% of respondents (45) meet with scholars there. Library staff also commonly meet with researchers in scholars' own offices and in a variety of library meeting spaces. Coffee shops are popular, too.

Funding Sources

Most respondents report that funding for DH projects from a combination of the library operating budget and grants. About half report funding from

academic departments, library IT, or special one-time funds, and about a third receive funding from endowments. About three-fourths of the respondents reported that researchers do not usually bring funding with them. In some case because they are still in the grant writing stage of their project.

While formal policies governing library support for DH projects are currently rare (only six libraries reported having a written document), libraries are developing mechanisms for managing these projects. Sixteen respondents described proposal processes that help determine whether a project warrants support based on academic criteria, such as research significance and audience, as well as more practical concerns such as resource availability and existing workload. Proposals tend to be reviewed and approved by library management or, in some cases, a library committee.

Policies and Procedures

Even when formal policies and proposal processes are absent, about half of those who responded to the survey use a Memorandum of Understanding, or MOU, to define the roles and responsibilities of those working on the project. Specifically, MOUs often define the scope of work, deliverables, timeline, costs (and who pays them), deposit agreement (when items will be placed in the library collection), downtime, and hours of operation.

Sustainability

The majority of respondents (27 or 59%) indicated that their libraries preserve digital humanities projects produced in-house. However, comments suggested that many libraries' preservation strategies are selective or evolving: in a number of cases, preservation workflows are "in-process" or "under discussion." Those libraries that preserve digital humanities projects adopt a range of sustainability strategies. Most commonly, libraries create projects that adhere to widely accepted standards for metadata. They also commonly preserve digital projects in repositories and create projects using widely supported platforms. A number of libraries (18 or 51%) develop grant proposals to ensure sustainability, while some work with project planners to incorporate sustainability costs

into project cost estimates (37%) or audit projects for long-term sustainability (31%).

Partnerships

Partnerships, both intra-institutional and inter-institutional, are very common in the digital humanities. Three-fourths of the responding libraries have partnered with other units in their institutions, frequently with university-wide technology services. University departments and various centers and offices were also common partners. Partnerships with other institutions were less common (56%), though respondents demonstrated a level of diversity within those partnerships. Other universities were the most common partners but non-profits and community groups were well represented.

Assessment

Most of the responding libraries do not perform a formal assessment of the effectiveness of their digital humanities services. Of those that do, the primary measures were level of demand and web analytics. A slight majority of those that did assessments made or plan to make adjustments as a result of them—some technical, some logistical, and some programmatic.

Emerging Practices and Procedures

As mentioned above, library-based support for the digital humanities is offered predominantly on an ad hoc basis. However, as demand for services supporting the digital humanities has grown, libraries have begun to re-evaluate their provisional service and staffing models. Many respondents expressed a desire to implement practices, policies, and procedures that would allow them to cope with increases in demand for services. A number of these models exhibit characteristics that are noteworthy either for their uniqueness or success. This section will examine noteworthy emerging practices and procedures.

Library-hosted Digital Humanities Centers

Although not prevalent, a number of research libraries are hosting dedicated digital humanities centers. At this point it is difficult to say whether dedicated digital humanities centers will become more common than the more generalized digital scholarship centers as the

field of digital humanities matures. Future surveys might explore the advantages and disadvantages of hosting dedicated digital humanities centers with respect to more generalized approaches or approaches that target specific fields in the digital humanities.

Staff Contributions

It is striking that many of the technical skills required for digital humanities projects are ones commonly possessed by professionals working in traditional fields of librarianship. To be specific, the survey results indicate that metadata librarians, archivists, special collections librarians, preservation specialists, and subject librarians are routinely called upon to serve on teams executing digital humanities projects. This gives credence to the belief that libraries have more to offer for digital humanities projects than just their collections. In fact, one is tempted to conclude that libraries will continue to support the digital humanities not only by acquiring staff with novel skill sets, but also by relying upon skills that have long been required in traditional librarianship.

Service Formalization

As mentioned above, libraries have typically provided digital humanities services on a provisional basis. As demand for such services has grown, however, libraries have found it increasingly difficult to maintain this service model. A number of respondents indicated in their survey responses a desire to formalize their service models in order to manage both growth in demand and customer expectations. A number of libraries have begun using Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) as a way of formalizing the scope of services they provide.

Project Sustainability

As digital humanities projects have grown in size, complexity, and number, libraries have had to devote increasingly more attention to the sustainability of the projects they support. A number of respondents acknowledged the importance of sustainability, and a few noted that their preservation workflows are “in

process” or “under discussion.” One strategy adopted by many libraries is to sustain or preserve only some projects, but not all. Another is to adhere to widely accepted platforms and metadata standards when creating a project.

Challenges and Opportunities

The survey revealed that at this stage in the evolution of digital humanities partnerships, there are still many challenges that need to be addressed. The general lack of policies, protocols, and procedures has resulted in a slow and, at times, frustrating experience for both library staff and scholars. This points toward the need for libraries to coordinate their efforts as demand for such collaborative projects increases. Additionally, support for digital humanities suffers from the perennial library issues of underfunding and understaffing. While scholars have traditionally used grant funds to pay for hardware, software, and labor, respondents to the survey reported that it is uncommon for scholars to come to the library with grant funds in hand for a digital humanities project.

It is clear that creative solutions will need to be found as money for still-emerging initiatives remains elusive. Libraries may find it valuable to present their support of digital humanities projects not as a new service, but as a way to more efficiently utilize scarce resources in the support of faculty projects. For example, deans and provosts are often inundated with funding requests for projects that start from scratch. They may be interested in a library-based initiative that could provide a foundation for such work and efficiently coordinate resource allocation by procuring hardware and software for the initiative as a whole and not just for individual projects. Similarly, granting agencies frequently receive applications for exciting projects that will have a hard time surviving reality if there is no dedicated technology support available to the scholar. Furthermore, explicitly involving the library from the beginning of a project should help scholars create more realistic sustainability plans, which are increasingly being required by grants.