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New trends in academic library partnerships: academic libraries and digital humanities

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Abstract:
Academic libraries have developed many strategical partnerships in the last ten years.

One very recent partnership is the collaboration with digital humanities research centers.

Librarians support digital humanists by training students and by using markup languages (for example TEI). Academic libraries also offer spaces and infrastructure to support the activities of the digital humanities centers.

A very special relationship is developing between digital humanities and digital libraries, as humanists massively use the digital library collections to study and to research.

Last but not least, the close collaboration between librarians and researchers is disclosing new opportunities for librarians to actively collaborate in research projects.

Keywords: Academic libraries, digital humanities, library partnerships.

Digital humanities: one definition (among eight hundred)

In the last twenty years technology has set up new opportunities for humanists. The intersection of information technology and disciplines in the humanities has deeply transformed scholarship and the methodology used by humanists in research, teaching, and learning.

Historians retrieve their sources and build digital interactive maps of historic sites, literary scholars explore born-digital and digitized documents to sort out common patterns in complex computational linguistics analysis. Classicists use the same documents to analyze ancient lexicon, automatically create lexical indices and publish critical editions, geographers exploit the potential of geolocation techniques and so on.

Nowadays, digital humanities is an umbrella term to include different practices, methodologies, technologies, and research strategies for humanists. They are the result of a dynamic dialogue between diverse and emerging technologies and the humanities.

The term “digital humanities” bears its own semantic complexity. As a matter of fact, the website “What is digital humanities” gathers more than 800 definitions of the term and each discipline in the humanities has probably his own valid definition for the term.

1 <http://www.whatisdigitalhumanities.com/>

To further explore digital humanities see: Digital Humanities Quarterly <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/>, DH Questions & Answers, is a “a community-based Q&A board” where scholars ask and answer questions on DH.
Kathleen Fitzpatrick, English professor and director of scholarly communication for the Modern Language Association, defines digital humanities as “a specialist interdisciplinary area mainly characterized by:

a) asking traditional and sometimes new humanistic questions using digital resources and methods;
b) subjecting computing technologies to interpretation and critique by humanistic methods and strategy of questioning” (ARL, 2011).

The first relevant concept we find in this definition is the interdisciplinarity: even if research practices remain different, the digital environment enhances research cross-fertilization and contamination among disciplines by offering humanists common tools and methodologies:

“although the breadth of fields covered is wide, what is revealed is how computing has cut across disciplines to provide not only tools, but methodological focal points”(A companion to digital humanities, 2004).

Cross-cutting skills become increasingly necessary to develop in DH. There is also an increasing need for collaborative work and for a model for managing DH projects (Tabak, 2017).

The second issue stepping out from this definition is the seamless relationship between tradition and innovation: old and new questions can be solved by digital humanities which are not a new research paradigm. Specifically, DH try to solve traditional problems by using digital tools and to help humanists to ask new research questions.

The third issue is probably the most relevant one: digital humanities is not a technology for the sake of technology. They encompass a large amount of work by subjecting it to the interpretation and criticism of different research methods.

Looking back in the past we can identify three periods in the studies on digital humanities (Dalbello, 2011):

- The first period starts long before the birth of Internet. It is well represented by the emergence of the first electronic texts, i.e. the Index Tomisticus, a pioneer in the computational linguistics analysis, strongly demanded by the Italian Jesuit scholar, Roberto Busa, who conceived it in 1949 in collaboration with IBM. At this stage, electronic texts are accessed and stored on magnetic tapes, later on they will be stored on CD-ROMs;

A new period starts for digital humanities in the mid-1990s strictly after the birth of Internet: humanists have now the possibility to take advantage of the potential of the net by creating digital archives.

The best-known digital resource representing this period is the Perseus Digital Library, the extraordinary digital “repertoire” of Greek and Latin texts conceived by Tufts University. It includes all the most relevant Greek documents of the 5th and 4th centuries BC. Less wide in content, but still extremely important, it is the Latin library. The majority of documents are enriched by English translations, critical comments, and learning materials.

“Il modello [della Perseus Digital Library n.d.a] prevede la costruzione di una rete di link ipertestuali che partono dal testo per arrivare a una serie di dati di contesto e di commento, indica la via per espandere le potenzialità del testo digitale, che diventerà al tempo stesso sia prodotto di una sofisticata analisi filologica, letteraria e storica, sia strumento per una piena comprensione del testo da parte degli utenti e anche per un approfondimento dell’indagine (Cristofori, 2015).”

The third period in digital humanities opens with the era of the collaboration in the web 2.0. One resource representing this period is the project: “Transcribe Bentham”, from the University of College London. The project’s aim is to engage the public in the online transcription of original and unstudied manuscript papers written by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham.

It is “a double award-winning collaborative transcription initiative, which is digitising and making available digital images of Bentham’s unpublished manuscripts through a platform known as the Transcription Desk. Scholars contribute in a collaborative way to the transcription of the Bentham’s works.

2 The quotation is taken from the “Transcribe Bentham” portal.
How can we identify the value added by digital humanities to research in the humanities?

Lisa Spiro focuses on five areas that enable digital humanities to go beyond the goals of traditional research in humanities (Spiro, 2011):

1. Provide wide access to cultural information;
2. Enable scholars to manipulate that data: manage, mash up, mine, map, model;
3. Transform scholarly communication;
4. Enhance teaching and learning;
5. Make a public impact.

The above listed areas sound very familiar to academic libraries.

Two out of five are key issues for academic libraries: i.e. the well-known principle of providing access to cultural information and the one of transforming scholarly communication.

More recently academic libraries have joined data manipulation projects and teaching and learning programs. Library instruction sessions in digital humanities include training on digital tools and applications, markup languages, and techniques for text analysis.

Last but not least, academic libraries have also a public impact. This impact is enhanced both by the huge dissemination of the research outputs and by the new mission placed on the universities: the social and cultural mission.

**Contamination: academic libraries and digital humanities**

Academic libraries and librarians have assumed a crucial role by taking part in digital humanities projects.

“The partnerships need not be viewed as a radical departure from the traditional strengths of research libraries. Indeed, these strengths mirror and complement the needs at the core of digital humanities of the digital humanities (Vandergrift, Varner, 2013)”

The mutual relationship between academic libraries and digital humanities runs along three closely related levels:
- the spatial level, i.e the **physical sharing** of spaces, staff and equipment;
- the service-oriented level, i.e. the **services and tools** developed by academic libraries to support research in digital humanities;
- the professional level, i.e. the **skills and expertise** gained by academic librarians in partnering on digital humanities projects.

**Spaces: academic libraries and digital humanities centers**

In the United States digital humanities centers are physically located in academic libraries.

By sharing their spaces, libraries and research centers in humanities create joint structures, the co-laboratories, where the first and the latter can carry out synergies and share projects, skills and resources.

The ScholarsLab of University of Virginia,3 the Digital Scholarship Commons of the Emory University, and the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities of the University of Nebraska are good examples of established digital centers where academic libraries experience team work with humanists.

**Services: academic libraries supporting digital humanities**

3<http://scholarslab.org/about/>.

“Libraries have always been about the digital and about the humanities (Kim, 2016).”

According to a survey sponsored by the Association for Research Libraries (ARL), in 2011 48% of the ARL libraries provided services to support digital humanities (ARL, 2011).

Almost half of the respondents (30 or 48%) provided ad hoc services, and almost a quarter (15 or 24%) hosted a digital scholarship center providing services to a number of disciplines including humanities. In sporadic cases, libraries may also have staff to devote to research projects in DH. Dedicated staff is most often a digital humanities librarian.

How libraries are supporting digital humanities?

First, academic and research libraries manage a potent infrastructure which is strategical for the success of the research in digital humanities. Frequently libraries share this digital leadership with ICT divisions whose focus is on technical issues while libraries pay more attention to knowledge organization and curation.

Second, academic libraries have long exploited ancient and rare book collections by digitizing large amount of them. Establishing a digitizing program which focuses on humanists’ needs is extremely relevant for digital humanities. As a matter of fact, digitization has offered humanists new sources and documents for their research.

“Examples of digital edition projects that are library-based collaborations with faculty and students include the Victorian Women Writers Project, based at the Indiana University Libraries in Bloomington, and the Shelley-Godwin Archive, a partnership between the New York Public Library and the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (based in the University of Maryland Libraries in College Park) [in cooperation with Oxford’s Bodleian Library] (Varner, Hwse, 2016).”

Nowadays academic libraries are deploying massive digital collections in multiples file formats.

“The representation of digital collections in various data formats may lead to creative programs and partnerships for instruction, collection development and strategy (as suggested in the section on text mining below), digitization, and training or “skilling up” opportunities for both librarians and researchers, including students, to name just a few possibilities (Varner, Hwse, 2016).”

Digital library collections are also increasingly used to launch new linked open data projects and to foster text and data mining.4 Librarians negotiate for access to digital collections to allow text and data analysis.

Third, academic and research libraries play a key role in implementing added-value services which support digital humanities. Particularly, data and document curation is pivotal for the research in the humanities.

Last but not least, digital libraries are themselves a research issue for digital humanists.

Skills: academic librarians supporting digital humanities

The exploitation of the digital infrastructure, the selection and digitization of the library collections, the challenge of knowledge organization, the use of metadata standards, and the identification and interpretation of the intellectual property rights in the digital environment require a set of specialized skills that academic librarians have developed over the years working on digital libraries.

These kinds of research involve not just the knowledge of relevant computer applications but also often skills and knowledge in collecting and organizing data, in which librarians have unique training and background (Kamada, 2010).”

The professional roles that most effectively support the activities of the digital humanities are an evolution of consolidated professional roles both in the academic library and in the digital library:

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4 Recently text-mining has been inspired by the “distant reading”, the text-analysis methodology proposed by the Italian scholar Franco Moretti.
i.e. the metadata librarian, the markup language expert librarian, the subject librarian, the collection specialist librarian, the expert of intellectual property issues and of copyright in the digital environment.

Repository managers, content management system experts and data visualization experts are also deeply involved in digital humanities projects.

More recently, data curators (or digital curators) have become strategic in the staffing of many digital humanities projects.

The training activity carried out by academic librarians in digital humanities projects is also intensifying.

This activity goes beyond the goals of the traditional information literacy or digital literacy: “librarians often develop complex assignments with instructors that are designed to give students experience doing deep research (Varner, Hwse, 2016).”

Library instruction sessions in digital humanities include training on digital tools and applications, markup languages, and techniques for text analysis.

What skills and competencies are needed to become a librarian expert in digital humanities?

Chris Alen Sula provides us with a short list of competencies:

“among the most germane competencies to DH are those concerning information resources (esp. digital resources), knowledge organization (esp. cataloging and classification of DH materials), technological knowledge and skills (including the analytical, visualization, and content management tools used by digital humanists), and users services (Sula, 2013).”

Digital humanities are a huge opportunity for academic librarians to build highly-specialized competencies and personal relationships with faculty.

Conceiving a competency framework for librarians in digital humanities is a relevant issue that will help to build capacity in libraries for supporting new roles in the area of scholarly communication and e-research.


Coming soon is the publication of the Librarians’ Competencies for Digital Humanities.

The above listed profiles have been specifically conceived to “enable library managers to identify skill gaps in their institution, form the basis of job descriptions, enable professionals to carry out self-assessments, and act as a foundation for the development of training programs for librarians and library professionals.”

New job positions are also emerging in digital humanities.

The DH Jobs Archive is a repository of jobs listed as relating to digital humanities.

Conclusions

Library partnerships in digital humanities projects is a great opportunity to become involved in the research workflow.

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5 The quotation is taken from the COAR page describing the Task Force activities: <https://www.coar-repositories.org/activities/support-and-training/task-force-competencies/>

6 <http://digitalhumanitiesnow.org/2012/04/resource-the-digital-humanities-job-archive/>
“There is no singular answer from the perspective of library administration about how libraries should engage with DH [...]. Some DH support may be best accomplished by providing large scale access to collections, datasets or technology; while other situations may merit individual, customized collaboration with DH researchers (Kamada, 2010).”

Digital humanities are the last border which academic libraries have to tackle.

In the last ten years, indeed, the open science paradigm, the scholarly communication evolution, the research assessment as well as the digitization projects have paved the way for repositioning the role of the academic library in the university context, offering different possibilities to strengthen collaboration between libraries and faculty.
The role of libraries has been revitalized. The premise is to get in the game and tackle the change.

References:


