The Impact of Digital Resources on Scholarship in the Digital Humanities

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INTRODUCTION

Even though digital humanities, or DH, is a current buzzword, the concept of humanities computing has been around since the 1960s when the journal *Computers and the Humanities* was launched. At that time, there had been at least a dozen conferences on humanities computing, two published proceedings, and several universities were considering offering programming courses for humanities students (Milic, 1966). Then, as now, scholars worried that the use of computers would over-mechanize the study of literature (Marche, 2012). However, Milic (1966) saw the possibilities of computation and knew that it was only the very beginning of a major change in humanities scholarship. Indeed, he was correct, for numerous DH conferences run annually, and DH journals and course offerings are growing at a rapid pace.

The Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0 defines the digital humanities not as a field, but as

[A]n array of convergent practices that explore a universe in which: a) print is no longer the exclusive or the normative medium in which knowledge is produced and/or disseminated; instead, print finds itself absorbed into new, multimedia configurations; and b) digital tools, techniques, and media have altered the production and dissemination of knowledge in the arts, human and social sciences. (Schnapp & Presner, 2009)

The purpose of the present article is to examine more closely the evolving field of the digital humanities. There is not yet a body of literature on the information needs and uses of digital humanists. We argue that the information behaviors of digital humanists are sufficiently different from that of traditional humanities scholars that they warrant careful attention by information science scholars. A definition of the humanities and a brief overview of the initial stages of DH provide the context for our article. The background section shows how difficult and complex it is to conceptualize DH as a single entity, and because of the evolving nature of this discipline, offers only a working definition. Even though multiple views on DH exist, in information science, definitions usually focus on what humanists *do* in comparison to scholars in other fields. In the main section of the article, we focus on the information science literature: we identify five traits that have characterized the work of traditional humanists and in particular their relation to information practices. The goal of this section is to examine what new practices have emerged in the humanities and what role electronic resources and digital tools play in them.

BACKGROUND

What constitutes the humanities is notoriously difficult to define. Though some of the oldest departments at universities traditionally fit under the humanities umbrella, this larger field of academia is too often defined by what it *is not*. The subjects included are not science, not social science (though history straddles the fence between the social sciences and the humanities) and not art (though the defining reasons for this separation are dwindling, and many schools have joined them to create a larger 'school of arts and humanities'). Generally included amongst humanities subjects are the fields of literature, philosophy, linguistics, religion, music, and history. Although there are many available lists of departments and topics that fall under this heading, the few attempts to truly define what it is that unites these

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fields under the umbrella term "humanities" fall short of offering an actual definition. Some scholars look to the past to define the word "humanities" and follow that through to the present day (Goudsblom, 1990; Thompson Klein, 2005). Others look at what functions humanists perform in society (Kagan, 2009), while others, LIS (library and information science) scholars in particular, look specifically at what these scholars do as part of their research and teaching (Case, 1986; Warwick, Terras, Galina, Huntington, & Pappa, 2008; Wiberley & Jones, 2000).

The DH term has created a lot of hype in the research community. A wide range of topics and related keywords are associated with the domain (see Garfinkel, 2013). For instance, DH has taken over large sections of international conferences (e.g., the Modern Languages Association's Annual Convention), numerous The Humanities and Technology (THAT) Camp unconferences are being organized around the world, and the number of scholars taking part in the annual DHSI (Digital Humanities Summer School) has grown, reaching an unprecedented 500+ participants in 2013. Despite its widespread popularity, the DH term is not without its problems. Fish (2012) has been perhaps the strongest critic of the movement, showing his disdain for DH research in a series of *New York Times* blog posts. His issues with the movement stem largely from the call for scholars to work with big data, and to use computers for data analysis, a method he believes works against traditional humanities scholarship:

first you run the numbers, and then you see if they prompt an interpretive hypothesis. The method, if it can be called that, is dictated by the capability of the tool. You have at your disposal an incredible computing power that can bring to analytical attention patterns of sameness and difference undetectable by the eye of the human reader. Because the patterns are undetectable, you don't know in advance what they are and you cannot begin your computer-aided search (called text-mining) in a motivated — that is, interpretively directed — way. You don't know what you're looking for or why you're looking for it. How then do you proceed? …

The answer is, proceed randomly or on a whim, and see what turns up. (Fish, 2012b, para. 11)

Even though the term is controversial, there is no doubt that a community of scholars exists whose work falls under the general rubric of DH. DH may not be characterized by any one single approach, theory, or even methodology, but it does follow a core of principles or loosely linked ideas. At the most basic level, the digital humanities are concerned with research, teaching, and invention related to computing in the humanities. In addition, a number of key ideas intersect to form DH:

1. Autonomy of the traditional humanities,
2. Interdisciplinarity in its approach, and
3. Creativity in the way in which problems are solved (Humanist Discussion Group, 2007; Suárez, 2010).

Perhaps the most central tenant weaving through all DH is the reliance on computing as a means to aid scholarship, teaching, and theorizing. DH has a hands-on approach toward computing, encouraging scholars to take matters into their own hands and experiment with tools, their development, implementation, and usage for the purpose of data extraction, analysis, and interpretation (Borgman, 2009; Manovich, 2012). Digital pedagogy is one area in which the results of this hands-on approach can be seen. As Stommel (2013) and Morris (2013) make clear, the move from the physical to the digital classroom opens up new questions about scholarship, authority, and participation.

In LIS literature it is emphasized that humanists have been reluctant to adopt technology in their work as they are "not technically gifted or, perhaps, even luddites" (Warwick, 2012, p. 2) and that the move toward integrating technology is novel. This is, however, not the case. Technology use has a long-standing history in the humanities. Already in 1980, Busa wrote about the experience of using computers as a means to analyze texts in his work on the Lexicon Electronicum Latinum. One of the central arguments Busa (1980) put forward was that the role of computers in scholarly work in the humanities should not be to speed up the process, but rather to expand existing results by adding new layers of understanding to a phenomenon. For him, it was the idea of being able to work through large amounts of data and to obtain insights that could not have been reached before without the computer.