Chapter 5
Perspectives on Digital Scholarship:
Exploring Conceptual Landscape and Practices in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Digital Scholarship (DS) defines new forms of professional academic practices linked to the changing cultural, social and working context of the digital age. In this chapter, the authors compare the international debate on the topic with the research trends that may be connected with DS in the Latin-American scenario. From the focus on DS as a changing professional field of practice, that of academics, and its specific transformation by digitality to other more evolved perspectives, i.e. the academic profession as a specialized research strand, the authors consider the different approaches, discourses and cases about academics' professional practices and development in Latin America and explore the trends and peculiarities that will determine the rise and development of digital scholarship as a field of research in the region.

INTRODUCTION: THE FAST EVOLUTION OF A NEW FIELD AND A NEW FRAMEWORK

The concept of *digital scholarship* (Borgman, 2007; Pearce, Weller, Scanlon, & Kinsley, 2012; Weller, 2011) defines new forms of professional academic practices linked to the changing cultural, social and working context of the digital age. As a topic of research, it is still in its infancy: studies contributing to understanding the phenomenon have been produced only in the last five years (Goodfellow, 2014). Consequently, it faces several challenges relating to the definition of specific problems within the "big issue" of DS:

1. The generation of a coherent and consistent conceptual and terminological structure;
2. The adoption of research methods in line with both problems and concepts; and
3. The value attached to research results (in terms of dissemination opportunities and social usability of the outcome).

While there is indeed a growing interesting in the issue, and the body of literature produced is becoming more and more consistent, some critical points require reflection and intervention by the research community contributing to the field (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012a).

As a matter of fact, the problems covered under the "umbrella" term of DS are diverse, encompassing different types of research approaches and disciplines. First, we find studies focused on the e-infrastructure and the connected affordances available to scholars to develop their own work (Borgman, 2007; Mower, 2009; Quigley, Neely, Parkolap, & Groom, 2013). Second, there is a focus on the professional identity and practices of scholars as agents in (and throughout) the digital world, in a state of tension vis-à-vis the ongoing higher education crisis (Goodfellow, 2014; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012a, Veletsianos, 2013). In addition to this, the literature offers several strands of research on what it is *to be a scholar* in an increasingly digitalized world. Some related areas of research which focus on the issue of doing research with digital tools and in digital environments, like digital humanities (Gold, 2012) or eResearch and eScience (den Besten et al., 2010; Bowker, Baker, Millerand, Ribes, 2010; De Roure, 2010; Ubell, 2010; Anandarajan et al., 2010) point to a more advanced developmental stage (Terras, Nyhan, & Vanhoutte, 2013) or status as an academic discipline in and of itself (the case of digital humanities, Galina & Priani, 2011; Flanders, 2013). As a result of this rather fragmented and complex landscape, there is a need to reconsider the field from both a conceptual and a methodological point of view, with the aim of clarifying its main achievements, current scenario and future trends.

Moreover, all these issues should be contextualized within each disciplinary and research perspective as well as within each region of the global context, to address properly both empirical research and the theoretical debate. As can be expected, this recent focus of interest deals with rather general problems, while striving to come up with clearer conceptualizations, in view of the lack of comparative perspectives, such as studies distinguishing geographical patterns relating to the topic, and eventually comparing the trends in mainstream research with the trends in a specific context.

In this chapter, the authors compare the international debate with the Latin-American scenario, which can be considered to be in its initial stage or, metaphorically, before and immediately after the "hype" about the adoption of technologies as part of the scholar's endeavour.

From the focus on DS as a changing professional field of practice, that of *academia*, and its specific transformation by digitality (Goodfellow, 2013), to other more evolved perspectives, i.e. the academic profession as specialized research strand, the authors consider the different approaches, discourses and cases about academics' professional practices and development in Latin America (LA) (Rama, 2011; Fernández Lamarra & Marquina, 2012; Naidorf & Perez Mora, 2012; Torres Velandia & Barona Ríos, 2012) and explore the trends and peculiarities that will determine the rise and development of digital scholarship as a field of research in the region.

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