

Traversing the Gap

Subject Specialists Connecting Humanities Researchers and Digital Scholarship Centers

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Introduction

Subject specialist librarians have a central role to play in the development of digital humanities projects and in the activities and community of digital scholarship centers. Many different parties come together to create digital projects. Subject librarians can provide the bridge between research scholars and technology librarians in the creation of various types of digital projects and various models of collaboration and throughout all stages of project development. This chapter will explore those relationships, models, and stages of project development and highlight the role of the subject librarian.

For the purposes of this chapter, digital humanities projects fall into two distinct categories, projects of first-order content and those containing second-order content.¹ First-order content projects are a digital re-creation of already existing materials such as digitized collections of letters. Little or no analysis of the materials is included. Second-order content projects take digital materials and enhance them, using any of a variety of digital tools

and techniques to more fully understand a research question: for example, mapping where a letter in a collection of correspondences was written to better understand the geographical context in which it was written, or correlating literacy rates with the locations of libraries and bookstores.² In some cases the end product of such research is a traditional journal article or monograph that analyzes the primary source material in ways that would have been impossible in the pre-digital age. In other cases, the final result of the project is a digital object, a collection, an online presentation of scholarship, or some combination of these, even though articles and other publications might be written about the project and process. A digital humanities project may involve some first-order content creation but must include the insight gained by using one or more digital tools to interpret data or some additional layer of scholarship.

Unlike traditional humanities research, digital humanities scholarship is not a solitary affair. Generally, no single person has all the skills, materials, and knowledge to create a research project. By nature, the digital humanities project, big or small, requires a collaborative team approach with roles for scholars, “technologists,” and librarians.³

Scholars

Scholarship is the center of any digital humanities project and the scholar—a faculty member, a postdoctoral student, or an independent researcher—is commonly the person who brings a research question to the project group. The scholar might already bring his or her own data and be requesting support in learning the appropriate tool to explore the research project,⁴ or the scholar might have a question but need support in finding or creating data. In larger collaborative projects, the scholar is a major player in the development of second-order content from primary source collections, such as annotated collected works of famous figures or documents, definitive editions of literary works, or collections of historical data. Scholars know how to structure a question and have a depth of knowledge in the content area. However, they might lack knowledge of end-user behavior and information architecture.

Technologists

Technologists know the tools and technology used to create and sustain a large digital collection or to analyze a set of data. They are up-to-date on appropriate software, provide the metadata and bibliographic control, create the user interfaces, maintain server space, and work with issues of access and preservation.⁵ While the subject librarians, as part of their liaison duties, are called upon to keep abreast of the most current technologies available to aid in research in their field, technologists are experts in the creation process rather than the content.

Compared to the librarians and scholars, the project's technologists are likely to come from a wider variety of sources. In many cases, they may be information technology staff from the university IT department, making them attuned to the overall university information management system but less familiar with humanities research and librarianship. Alternatively, assistance might be sought outside the university entirely, contracting support from professional information management companies. These companies often feature large-scale operations, capable of serving multiple clients simultaneously. However, they will be more removed from academic culture (particularly that of a specific university), and the project will most likely be to them one of many disparate tasks. The technology support may also come from within the library or a related department. So-called "digital librarians" are a hybrid of technologist and librarian, with a specific proficiency in developing online collections and other repositories.

Another common solution to the demand for humanities research-focused technologists has been the development of digital scholarship centers. While these centers focus on the software and other tools used by technologists, they are culturally and physically closer to the scholars and librarians; indeed, many of these centers are housed within university libraries. Miami University is a midwestern public university of approximately 16,000 students. Although it is primarily an undergraduate residential campus, there are some graduate programs and one doctorate program in the humanities. In spring 2013, the Center for Digital Scholarship opened at Miami and occupies space within King Library, the main

campus library and a focal point for student gatherings. By being physically located in the same building as the humanities librarians (as well as the humanities materials and special collections), the Center for Digital Scholarship is able to foster more direct and personal connections to the humanities subject librarians. The Center for Digital Scholarship began as the Digital Initiatives department under Technical Services but split off to become an autonomous department within the library system. This sort of evolution, with a digital scholarship center growing out of a preexisting department or group within a library, has also occurred at the University of Oregon. These digital scholarship centers possess direct, strong ties to the librarians at the university due to their origins and staff but are more likely to need to work to develop connections with faculty.

In contrast to evolving from a preexisting department, other digital scholarship centers—such as the one found at the University of Notre Dame—are entirely new creations. Still others might be born of library initiatives but be staffed more by people from scholarly—rather than librarian—backgrounds. Centers like these, such as the Scholars’ Lab at the University of Virginia, possess many more direct connections to other scholars, although not all their staff may be as immediately familiar with library culture. But whatever their origin or composition, all these centers for digital scholarship possess the same goals of collaboration and innovation in research.

Humanities Subject Librarians

Beyond the standard repertoire of librarian skills, subject librarians possess advanced knowledge (and often an advanced degree) in their particular areas. They are responsible for curating a library collection and are closely familiar with its unique strengths. But, beyond collections, a subject librarian is also a liaison who has built working relationships with departments and understands the research interests and instructional needs of their faculty, staff, and students. As with all areas of the library, the position of subject librarian has evolved over recent decades and will continue to do so. The role of “subject bibliographer” has given way to a model that

“encompass[es] the broadening scope of scholarship, especially involving digital archival and special collections, digital tools and progressive service models.”⁶ Librarians were seen at one time as keepers of warehouses and repositories. However, they are now collection builders and managers, instructors, and evaluators of information. They have become adept at adapting to a changing information environment and to shifts in scholarly production. Because of this adaptability, subject librarians have the ability to keep up with changes in technology and patterns of scholarship.

Scholars, technologists, and humanities subject librarians each bring a unique approach: the scholar, content knowledge; the technologist, the necessary technological skills; and the subject librarian, the overarching understanding of digital humanities research. While they are often trying to communicate with different languages, understandings, and approaches, all want to work together toward common goals: ensuring broad access to resources of cultural heritage and information, finding new and valuable ways to manipulate data, improving communication—both in teaching and in learning—and, most important, finding a way to make a significant impact on the greater public. With subject knowledge and a holistic view of technology tools, the subject librarian is in a unique position to mediate between all participants.

Subject Librarian Roles in Digital Humanities

Digital humanities projects are created in a diverse array of local arrangements and combinations of team members, but most often involve libraries. The Ithaka report *Sustaining the Digital Humanities: Host Institution Support beyond the Startup Phase* outlines three common models found at institutions with established digital humanities programs.⁷ In the service model, whether it be a university IT department, a library, or an instructional technology service, “the service unit seeks to meet the demand expressed by faculty, often with a strong focus on meeting an individual’s research needs.”⁸ In libraries, this takes the form of making existing structures and services, such as metadata and repositories, available to scholars. The library acts in a supportive capacity, but it is not necessarily an active participant in the research. Rather, “the service model primarily aims to

help the faculty on campus learn about DH methods, foster campus-wide discussion on the topic, encourage discussions and roundtables and build” projects.⁹ A common observation about the service model is that librarians “see their work not as supporting research, but as research, period, and they view the relationships they have with faculty as being most productive when they are partnerships of equals.”¹⁰

In a lab model, the organization functions more like a biology lab, representing “a robust cycle of support, fueled by innovative projects and the grant funding they attract.”¹¹ Teams in the lab model form to address needs as they arise and can grow to bring in additional people as grant funding and need allow. Because this model is flexible and brings together people in a project-centered collaboration, there is great variety in lab model collaborations.

Finally, the network model is a more organic connection of services and resources on a campus, a connection that grows to meet other needs, but all the services have resources to contribute to the success of a digital humanities project. Miami University’s digital humanities efforts generally fall into this model, with support coming from the libraries’ Center for Digital Scholarship, the Humanities Center, the office of Advanced Learning Technologies, and university IT services. Each has resources available to support different aspects of a digital humanities project.

No matter the local arrangement, the subject librarian has a role to play. Skills such as selection, acquisitions, cataloging, access, preservation, on-line systems development, and digitization, “often found in the backrooms of our libraries,”¹² are crucial to the success of digital humanities projects. Libraries have been identified as resources where faculty can learn from librarians the skills necessary to complete digital humanities projects, such as text encoding, metadata creation, and preservation and long-term sustainability.¹³ But, while there is a clear role for libraries, previous research makes little distinction between types of librarians and the contributions each might make. Even though the role of a subject librarian will certainly be defined by the needs of a project and local political and technological circumstances, there are several essential ways a subject librarian might support a digital humanities project throughout the process of its creation

and dissemination. Many of these potential roles draw on the skills subject librarians have developed throughout their careers as liaisons, instructors, collectors, and information providers.

Recruitment and Gathering Interest

It is imperative that librarians seek out opportunities and collaborators, rather than waiting for them to seek out the library. Many libraries participate in digital humanities projects, but often only in response to a researcher request.¹⁴ As liaisons to departments and persons knowledgeable in their fields, subject librarians have an already-developed network of connections for this purpose. Subject liaisons should work to identify which of their faculty members are already involved in digital humanities work—or would likely show an interest in it. While it may be with the best intentions, fearing to bother faculty or take on a leadership role in a scholarly project is a hindrance to developing the subject librarian's full potential as part of a digital humanities collaboration by relegating the librarian to a support position rather than that of a peer.

The subject librarian's participation at this stage of the process is essential in institutions that have no or little interest in digital humanities projects. The subject librarian has a crucial role to play in working with technologists to educate faculty on shifts in patterns of scholarship. Subject librarians can work with the faculty in their liaison departments to provide information on the expanded opportunities to use digital tools to ask new questions and to take new approaches to scholarship. They may also use background knowledge to create digital projects of their own. One of many benefits of this would be giving an example of digital scholarship to faculty who may have had little exposure to such approaches. At Miami University Libraries, for example, the subject librarian for Spanish began a text-encoding project with the English librarian with letters between Mexican playwright Rodolfo Usigli and George Bernard Shaw, letters that were contained in a manuscript collection held in Special Collections. Awareness of this project, due to conversations between the Spanish subject librarian and the faculty in the department of Spanish and Portuguese, has led to

an interest in creating additional digital projects using other materials in the manuscript collection. The university libraries and the department of Spanish and Portuguese have begun a collaboration with the aim of connecting with other campus departments and Mexican cultural institutions to find support for a large-scale digital humanities project.

Efforts to create a digital humanities community at Miami University illustrate these potential roles for subject librarians in the early stages of developing projects on campus. In 2012, a university-wide working group of subject librarians, technologists, and the Miami University Humanities Center formed to investigate faculty interests in the digital humanities. The working group distributed a survey to humanities faculty in an effort to gauge interest on campus. The survey asked respondents to identify their status in the university and their division; whether they had a strong sense of the work being done in the digital humanities and, if so, if they could identify particularly powerful or helpful work in DH; whether they had done or planned to do any DH projects; and what kind of resources they would need in order to do work in DH. Results were surprisingly indicative of a need for basic information and education about digital approaches and methodologies in humanities research.

To introduce the campus community to the breadth of digital humanities, technologists and subject librarians worked with the university's Humanities Center to plan and host a Digital Humanities Symposium. The symposium was well received by faculty and graduate students in the humanities. Subsequently the campus-wide Digital Humanities Working Group provided support to bring in a consultant to examine the digital humanities environment. The consultant's final report provided suggestions for improvement in service models and communication strategies for all the potential partners in digital humanities work. Currently the libraries' digital humanities advisory committee (made up of subject librarians and technologist librarians) is working with the Humanities Center on creating a faculty institute to provide structured support to faculty as they develop and create digital projects.

As with all of our suggested roles for subject librarians, participation in the project-planning process can be adapted to the digital humanities mod-

el at a particular institution. In a service model, recruitment and gathering interest meets the need of educating scholars about the services provided. A subject librarian operating in a lab model might work to identify projects that would benefit from his or her expertise and offer to be part of a project team. Those at institutions with a network model might draw on their already strong network of faculty and campus resources to identify pools of resources from which a scholar might draw support.¹⁵ These roles are flexible and should be adapted as needed to fit local situations.

In the Project-Planning Stages

While developing a faculty base for humanities projects, it is useful to identify library participants and think about the project-planning process and how to engage the scholar. In the preliminary planning stages of a project, a subject librarian's contributions can shape its trajectory and long-term success. The subject librarian's participation begins with the very first point of selecting topic, scope, and content. Trained to ask questions about the value that an item can bring to the collection as a whole, librarians have long been familiar with the task of selection. The librarian/scholar partnership in selection leads to a better project because a scholar can bring intellectual rigor to selection, and a librarian, a more targeted approach.¹⁶ By being slightly removed from the object of study, a subject librarian is able to make decisions based on collection strength or institutional and preservation needs or ability to answer the original research question, rather than solely on the personal interest brought by a faculty scholar.¹⁷ The subject librarian might also help balance the perspective of the technologists on the project, expanding the selection criteria beyond technical considerations, such as the ease of digitization and coding. This same perspective can also work in reverse. A subject librarian's knowledge of technical considerations can help limit a project's scope to the items most able to benefit the collection while also making the best use of a technologist's time and resources.

Also essential in early planning is establishing access and organization. Metadata librarians and other technologists, with expertise in information architecture, are less likely to have a broad knowledge of a given subject area as well as the necessary selection skills. Likewise, scholars are

not likely to have a deep understanding of the need to build a consistent and rigorous system of organization of the information they are creating. Whether or not subject librarians catalog, they have some knowledge of organizing information, metadata, and subject hierarchies. Subject librarians can play a role in the selection and organization of controlled vocabulary and of information-access points. Subject librarians take the scholar's deep knowledge of a subject area, translate it through their knowledge of information organization, and convey it in terms that can facilitate the work of a metadata librarian.

Just as selection and organization are square in a librarian's skill set, so too are a knowledge of issues related to digital preservation and long-term access. Here again, the subject librarian can play an intermediary role between the technologists' interest in maintaining the existing infrastructure, preferred file formats, and digital preservation conventions, and the scholar's immediate concerns, such as scope, material selection, and organization.¹⁸ The subject librarian must balance a scholar's interests and ideas for the project with the scope of the project, the needs of a collection, and the technical considerations of a long-term preservation plan.

During Implementation

Perhaps the subject librarian's greatest contribution to digital humanities projects during implementation is to connect faculty to resources in support of digital scholarship available in their university.¹⁹ If subject librarians develop knowledge of the technological tools available, they can contribute an understanding of how one might be used to answer a question from the scholar's disciplinary approach. A technologist might know that a tool like Voyant can analyze a text for word use and proximity, but the subject librarian can help a scholar to meaningfully interpret the results.

Subject librarians can contribute their knowledge of information-seeking habits and end-user behavior when interacting with digital information sources. As Harkema and Nelson note, "liaison librarians are responsible for assessing the needs of their community of scholars and students and providing them with the best, most relevant resources available."²⁰ A librarian's experiences on the reference desk and in the classroom provide

concrete examples of the different levels of expectations of users new to digital scholarship. For example, a digital collection of historical student newspapers has many potential uses. An alumnus searching a collection of digital student newspapers would likely be interested in browsing for an article from his time as a student without any specific need. A student with an assignment would be more interested in efficient and targeted searching capabilities to help her find articles on a particular event or activity. A subject librarian understands that any project has various levels of potential use and that access points to the information need to be created. Often the end users interact with a collection in ways not originally imagined by its creators, and anticipating this contributes to the overall usability of a project.

Upon Completion

Subject librarians can continue to contribute to a project long after its completion. Their participation in deciding what to include in a digital collection “will increase the odds that valuable scholarship in digital form will not be lost. In fact, [the librarian’s] goal should be to help make this scholarship easily found, readily used, and permanently preserved.”²¹ The subject librarian can assist in keeping the collection current and relevant by playing a role in the promotion of and access to the completed project through reference interactions, instruction, and internal and external promotion. No project is ever truly finished and will need to be revisited and updated in response to developing user behavior. Through their interaction with end users, subject librarians can bring functional and usability issues to the technologist’s attention.

Subject librarians work with faculty to evaluate the impact of their scholarship. Especially important is the liaison’s role in working with departments to understand the value of digital scholarship in the tenure process. In the digital environment, they can work with faculty to identify the most appropriate metrics to demonstrate a project’s impact in the scholar’s field. For example, another project may replicate methodology or data originally generated in a project, much as one scholar might cite another’s journal article. The subject librarian’s perspective can anticipate

future reuse of data and methodology, facilitating its use by future scholars, potentially leading to greater long-term impact.

Practical Suggestions for Subject Librarians

A subject librarian must have an active role in each stage of a project's life cycle. In this active participation, a librarian acts as a translator between the technical and metadata librarians and the scholars working on digital humanities projects. A subject librarian's knowledge allows him or her to translate technology to the scholar and the scholarship to the technologist. Having a basic understanding of available content management systems, the skills and local resources technologists provide, and the ways all of these can be leveraged to answer a faculty member's research question will lead to more successful collaborations. Just like a language interpreter, those with success are able to understand and navigate the richness of a local culture while connecting to and understanding the perspective and needs of the visitor to that culture.

To build this understanding, subject librarians must see the imperative to evolve along with shifts and changes in patterns of scholarship. Table 1.1 includes some practical suggestions to help subject librarians develop and promote successful digital humanities research at their institutions.

Table 1.1	
Suggestions for subject librarians to help develop and promote successful digital humanities research at their institutions.	
Level of commitment	Possible activities
<i>Low commitment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect with graduate students in humanities programs, especially those who have not yet begun the thesis or dissertation process. • Learn the basics of your institution's technological infrastructure and environment. • Learn about preservation formats and standards. • Learn about alt-metrics and alternative ways to measure the impact of digital scholarship. • Explore successful digital humanities projects.
<i>Moderate commitment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host a symposium on digital humanities and invite external participants (including faculty on campus, faculty already engaged digital humanities scholarship, technologists, and librarians). • Work with faculty and undergraduate classes to design an assignment using a digital humanities tool. • Provide workshops for faculty on digital humanities tools or developments in scholarship. • Provide training for technologists in subject background for projects. • Seek free training on digital humanities tools provided by developers. • Work with technologists or online tools such as Scratch, Code School, or Code.org to learn the basics of coding (PHP, MySQL, and Apache, for example).
<i>Intensive commitment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate a new digital humanities project using the librarian's unique subject collections.

Librarians need to be perceived as integral players on a team because they can offer both technical and intellectual skills. Although historically librarians have described themselves using the concept of library service, Trevor Muñoz argues that focusing a librarian's role in a digital humanities project in this way diminishes the role the librarian plays.²² By nature, no matter the size, the digital humanities project is a collaborative team ap-

proach, and “the need for multiple skills is undeniable, and underscores the need for scholars, librarians, and programmers to work together.”²³ Nowviskie also makes this argument, using a corporate team model for digital humanities projects in academia.²⁴ Support for digital humanities is not just another service for libraries to offer patrons, but rather an opportunity for subject librarians to be full partners when it comes to scholarship production.

Notes

1. Chris Alen Sula, “Digital Humanities and Libraries: A Conceptual Model,” *Journal of Library Administration* 53, no. 1 (January 2013): 10–26, doi:10.1080/01930826.2013.756680.
2. See Fiona Black, Bertrum H. MacDonald, and J. Malcolm W. Black, “Geographic Information Systems: A New Research Method for Book History,” *Book History* 1 (1998): 11–31, www.jstor.org/stable/30227281.
3. Bethany Nowviskie, “Skunks in the Library: A Path to Production for Scholarly R&D,” *Journal of Library Administration* 53, no. 1 (January 2013): 53–66, doi:10.1080/01930826.2013.756698.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Micah Vandegrift and Stewart Varner, “Evolving in Common: Creating Mutually Supportive Relationships between Libraries and the Digital Humanities,” *Journal of Library Administration* 53, no. 1 (January 2013): 68, doi:10.1080/01930826.2013.756699.
7. Nancy Maron and Sarah Pickle, *Sustaining the Digital Humanities: Host Institution Support beyond the Start-up Phase* (New York: Ithaka S&R, June 18, 2014), www.sr.ithaka.org/sites/default/files/SR_Supporting_Digital_Humanities_20140618f.pdf.
8. *Ibid.*, 23.
9. *Ibid.*, 31.
10. *Ibid.*, 24.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Mary M. Case, “Partners in Knowledge Creation: An Expanded Role for Research Libraries in the Digital Future,” *Journal of Library Administration* 48, no. 2 (2008): 142, doi:10.1080/01930820802231336.
13. Harriett E. Green, “Facilitating Communities of Practice in Digital Humanities: Librarian Collaborations for Research and Training in Text Encoding,” *Library Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (April 1, 2014): 219–34, doi:10.1086/675332; Craig Harkema and Brent Nelson, “Scholar-Librarian Collaboration in the Publication of Scholarly Materials,” *Collaborative Librarianship* 5, no. 3 (July 2013): 197–207, <http://collaborativelibrarianship.org/index.php/jocl/article/view/243/206>; Sula, “Digital Humanities and Libraries.”
14. Vandegrift and Varner, “Evolving in Common.”
15. Maron and Pickle, *Sustaining the Digital Humanities*, 34.

16. Harkema and Nelson, "Scholar-Librarian Collaboration," 201.
17. Miranda Remnek, "Adding Value to Slavic Electronic Texts: Approaches for Scholars and Librarians," *Slavic and East European Information Resources* 6, no. 2–3 (2005): 151–67, doi:10.1300/J167v06n02_10.
18. Sula, "Digital Humanities and Libraries."
19. Green, "Facilitating Communities of Practice."
20. Harkema and Nelson, "Scholar-Librarian Collaboration," 203.
21. Case, "Partners in Knowledge Creation," 145.
22. Trevor Muñoz, "In Service? A Further Provocation on Digital Humanities Research in Libraries," *dh + lib* (blog), June 19, 2013, <http://acrl.ala.org/dh/2013/06/19/in-service-a-further-provocation-on-digital-humanities-research-in-libraries>.
23. Remnek, "Adding Value to Slavic Electronic Texts," 161.
24. Nowviskie, "Skunks in the Library."

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