Managing Technology (JAL July 2011)

Geoffrey Little

Concordia University

[Geoffrey.little@concordia.ca](mailto:Geoffrey.little@concordia.ca)

**We Are All Digital Humanists Now**

The “digital humanities” are hot. On what seems like a weekly basis, university and college public affairs offices announce that one of their faculty or research teams have made an advance in our understanding of an author’s corpus, the use of certain words and phrases across time, or the study of medieval manuscripts.[[1]](#endnote-1) The term has appeared in the professional and scholarly literature and in articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *New York Times*’ “Humanities 2.0” series.[[2]](#endnote-2) Some of us may also work at institutions that sponsor digital humanities programs, labs, or centers like those at Maryland, Columbia, or Virginia, or we are involved in the production or management of digital projects and resources. At the same time, some librarians might come across the term “digital humanities” and turn the page or scroll down to another article. Another year, another trend; perhaps something for younger colleagues to worry about; or projects only supported by the library’s IT or systems department.

What are the digital humanities? Broadly defined, the digital humanities use information technologies like high-speed computing, textual analysis, digitization, data visualization, and geo-spatial mapping techniques in support of research and teaching in fields like literature, languages, history, art history, and philosophy. While the “humanities have been the most resistant to digital endeavors,”[[3]](#endnote-3) examples of digital humanities tools and resources are quite easy to identify and are immediately familiar to librarians. JSTOR, ProjectMuse, Archive of Americana, Early English Books Online (EEBO), Project Gutenberg, and the Internet Archive can be classed under the digital humanities heading, as can Google Books. Depending on how you look at Google Books, the web site is either a goldmine for scholars, readers, and a breakthrough in online access to our printed heritage or a cold, for-profit digitization engine with no interest in the public good. The company has made millions of books and journals available online, although in March 2011 a New York judge halted the “Google Settlement”—that is, its settlement of copyright issues with the Authors Guild and the Association of American Publishers.[[4]](#endnote-4) Perhaps as a result of his institution’s participation in the Google Books project, Harvard’s Robert Darnton has proposed a not-for-profit alternative: a National Digital Public Library for the United States.[[5]](#endnote-5) This idea seems to be gaining ground and Berkman Center for Internet and Society convened a day-long panel in March 2011 to discuss the shape and form of this proposed digital library.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Beyond Google Books and the emotions that it prompts, the digital humanities have been a fixture on the academic and cultural landscape for more than a few years. Project Gutenberg first started in 1971 when Michael Hart sent a typed version of the *Declaration of Independence* across electronic networks,[[7]](#endnote-7) the Library of Congress began a project in the early 1980s to digitize and store textual images on optical discs,[[8]](#endnote-8) and scholarly journals like *The Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (<http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/>) and *Psycoloquy* (<http://www.cogsci.ecs.soton.ac.uk/cgi/psyc/newpsy>) have been online since 1990. More recently, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) created an Office for Digital Humanities in 2008 with a goal toward coordinating NEH support for digital initiatives in the humanities, while also working to engage major players in a dialogue about access and preservation. As of April 2011, the Office’s web site lists 203 projects that have been funded over the past three years.[[9]](#endnote-9) The NEH has also partnered with the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) in Canada, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), JISC (formerly known as the Joint Information Systems Committee) in the UK, and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research to organize the “Digging into Data Challenge.” The challenge asks applicants to form international teams and winning proposals receive project funding. “Digging into Data” presents a “so what?” question for digital humanists on its web site: “Now that we have massive databases of materials used by scholars in the humanities and social sciences—ranging from digitized books, newspapers, and music to transactional data like web searches, sensor data or cell phone records—what new, computationally-based research methods might we apply?”[[10]](#endnote-10)  Taking that question one step further, what knowledge and advancements might come out of that research? George Mason’s Tom Scheinfedlt told *The New York Times* that he calls this kind of practical test the “’Where’s the beef?’ question.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Librarians and scholars are also becoming increasingly concerned about “born digital” collections. These kinds of materials were created on a computer and include word processor files, e-mails, MP3 recordings, even Facebook wall posts, tweets, and text messages. Alan Liu from UC Santa Barbara sums it all up quite precisely: “Once, humanists and artists produced essays, books, short stories, or paintings; while social scientists produced surveys…and engineers produced datasets…Now everyone produces “files.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Born digital resources are also changing the ways in which we define archival papers, personal records, and many kinds of special collections. At the State Library of Victoria in Australia, the papers of Booker Prize winner Peter Carey, author of *A True History of the Kelly Gang*, include the iBook 4G laptop that he used to write the novel, as well drafts and proofs on paper, while the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin boasts a 1983 model portable computer (weighing 28 pounds) as part of its collections.[[13]](#endnote-13) The challenge—and commitment—here centers on preservation and access. How do we ensure that books or images that we digitize this year will be viewable the next? What about documents created using obsolete or comparatively ancient software (*pace* the Library of Congress optical disc project)? Does your library have a WordStar or MP3 expert on staff? What about materials saved on “the cloud” like Google documents or files on external servers or hard drives? How do we present these kinds of materials to our users and how do we make sure they don’t go up in so much electronic smoke? It is no small wonder that the term “data curation” is being used more and more in reference to digital and electronic librarianship. Columbia’s James G. Neal clearly believes that libraries need to sort out the issues around born digital materials sooner rather than later. In the March-April 2011 issue of the *EDUCAUSE Review*, he wrote that, “Libraries need to advance a national plan, carefully working with the Internet Archive and the Library of Congress, to make sure that the intellectual, cultural, and scientific record is captured and preserved for permanent availability and use. This is a ‘collection development’ imperative that will ensure that born-digital resources will not be lost to learning and research and that the "bibliographic rot" we are now experiencing will not undermine the integrity and productivity of the scholarly infrastructure.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

Given these kinds of challenges and opportunities, what kinds of positions should academic librarians and libraries stake out on the digital humanities landscape? James J. O’Donnell, provost and professor of Classics at Georgetown University (and co-founder of the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*), wrote in 2009 that scholars “know that there are tools and techniques at hand that could radically alter existing paradigms of work and open new doors of inquiry and understanding; but who will show us how to use them? For a historian to learn database design, GIS, or techniques of multimedia presentation is no easy thing…”[[15]](#endnote-15) Can librarians step into this breach? The simple answer, assuming we want to maintain our relevance within the scholarly endeavor, is yes. At the same time and looking around, it would appear that digital humanities projects and programs work best when interdisciplinary teams of librarians, IT specialists, and scholars come together to share expertise, knowledge, skills, and, perhaps most importantly, resources. No profession is an island. The well-known *Roman de la Rose* project started in 1996 when a Johns Hopkins professor approached the university library about digitizing French medieval manuscripts to use in teaching. Fifteen years later, the project has grown in scope to include libraries in the US, UK, Japan, and France and a team of librarians, programmer-analysts, and specialists in medieval art and literature.[[16]](#endnote-16) The Modernism Lab at Yale is supported by the library, the university’s instruction technology group, and led by professors across a number of departments interested in the origins of literary modernism.[[17]](#endnote-17) At the same time, Hitoshi Kamada wrote in a recent article in *College & Research Libraries News* that “Researchers may choose to engage in smaller digital projects designed to support their work without a large investment of resources. Large-scale digital projects by libraries or universities are still important. But I would like to see how librarians can help researchers with their digital projects on an individual basis.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Does this mean that humanities subject specialists also need to build and collect an increasing array of technical skills in programming, digital architecture, and design in support of individual faculty, or should libraries concentrate this role in a single position or unit? The answer may be a combination of both. In either case, what skills do librarians need to meet this new challenge within humanities outreach and liaison work? Looking at the job advertisements for digital humanities librarians recently posted by Brown and York University in Toronto, candidates are asked to demonstrate an understanding of humanities research, expertise with emerging technologies and digital tools, and a grasp of the scholarly communications process.[[19]](#endnote-19) An advanced degree and a foreign language would be helpful, as would experience in reference services and collection development. Is this a tall order or the new normal?

Putting those questions aside, there are a number of avenues open for practicing librarians to train in digital humanities scholarship and project management. The University of Victoria has been hosting the Digital Humanities Summer Institute since 2004[[20]](#endnote-20) and George Mason sponsors THATCamp (The Humanities and Technologies Camp, http://thatcamp.org/), a “non-conference” that travels through Canada, the US, and Europe. University College, London, and Loyola University in Chicago offer graduate degrees in the digital humanities and a number of schools sponsor undergraduate, graduate, or interdisciplinary courses in digital humanities-related subjects across a number of departments and programs. Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swathmore jointly sponsor the Tri-Co Digital Humanities consortium and Haverford recently organized an undergraduate digital humanities conference .[[21]](#endnote-21) The venerable Rare Book School at the University of Virginia also now offers several courses for special collections librarians on digitizing historical collections and managing born digital materials.[[22]](#endnote-22) For librarians, professional development and ongoing training are important, but so is a firm base in the concepts around digital scholarship. Are library and information science programs giving their students skills in digital project management, programming, preservation, and metadata creation and control? Is this an area where the iSchool caucus (<http://www.ischools.org/>) can build and demonstrate leadership?

In the absence of wider institutional support, digital humanities projects often struggle to sustain themselves with only soft funding and one or two dedicated faculty advocates and a part-time programmer or two. In an article in *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, William A. Kretzschmar and William Gray Potter of the University of Georgia call this the “stand-still-and-die problem for digital humanities projects.”[[23]](#endnote-23) The authors go on to describe how the over 80 year old Linguistic Atlas Project, which was digitally converted in the 1980s, required more and more time, effort, and funding to keep it viable in the Internet age. Eventually, the project began to collaborate with the University of Georgia library to incorporate, archive, and disseminate the Atlas. In this case, the authors (one of whom is the Georgia university librarian) saw the library as a natural home for the project and a place with more permanent funding and staffing. That said, should libraries rescue ailing small- or medium-scale stand-alone digital projects or should they be subject to natural selection, in which case those projects that survive will have the best grant applications and the hardest working project staff? Do libraries need to build in more support for these kinds of projects or the creation of digital infrastructure for the whole campus? If the answer is yes, then how are these projects to be funded from already tight library budgets? If the answer is no, then whose job is it?

More than a few unknowns remain, but digital humanities scholarship and tools are still in their infancy. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* quoted Stanford English and comparative literature professor Franco Moretti as saying that Google Books is like the first high-power telescope. Suddenly, “an enormous amount of matter becomes visible.”[[24]](#endnote-24) The problem then becomes how to organize, sort, and make sense of it all. Information overload is now a hazard of the humanist’s job. But we have some sense of what the future will look like: increasingly sophisticated, powerful, and ever-evolving information technologies will allow humanities scholars and students to experiment within their disciplines and conduct new researches and analysis that will generate a great deal of data that in turn will require access points, storage, preservation. At the same time, funding models are far from fixed, resources are scarce, and tenure committees (for both professors and librarians) may not understand or even give weight to interdisciplinary web-based projects over monographs or articles in peer-reviewed journals. In the article I referenced earlier in this column, James O’Donnell asks scholars a set of questions that can just as easily be asked of librarians: “Do we have the right questions to ask? Do we have the right disciplinary alignments? Are we making the new (including the very products of cyberspace) a part of our own sphere of study and interpretation as responsibly and carefully as we maintain the old (and link the study of old and new)? Will we be ambitious enough in our questions to find answers…?”[[25]](#endnote-25) The same goes for academic librarians: will we be able to build skills, workflows, competencies, and infrastructures to help digital humanities faculty and students create and sustain digital projects? The answer should be “yes”—provided we can be ambitious enough in our questions.

1. Notes and References

   For example, see: School of Advanced Study, University of London, “Sir Brian Vickers Uses Computer Software to Prove that Shakespeare Co-Authored Plays,” <http://www.sas.ac.uk/index.php?id=436&no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=669&cHash=b17d775bbe2f5260b6de60830f411f73> (accessed on April 11, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *New York Times*, “Humanities 2.0,” <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/features/books/series/humanities_20/index.html> (accessed on April 10, 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Deborah L. Anderson*, Digital Scholarship in the Tenure, Promotion and Review Process* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe Publishing, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Miguel Helft et al., “Federal Judge Rejects Google’s Negotiated Deal to Digitize Books,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2011, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9802E4DE1231F930A15750C0A9679D8B63&ref=googleinc> (accessed on April 12, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Robert Darnton, “A Library Without Walls,” *New York Review of Books NYR Blog*, October 4, 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2010/oct/04/library-without-walls/> (accessed on April 15, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Berkman Center for Internet and Society, “March 1 Workshop Notes” <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/dpla/March_1_Workshop_Notes> (accessed on April 9, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Michael Hart, “The History of Philosophy of Project Gutenberg,” <http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Gutenberg:The_History_and_Philosophy_of_Project_Gutenberg_by_Michael_Hart> (accessed on April 15, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. William R. Nugent, “Optical Disk Technology” in *In Service to Scholarship: Minutes of the One-Hundredth Meeting* (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 1982), pp. 74-79, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=fibpAAAAMAAJ&lpg=PA74&ots=wamHzM9DMr&dq=Optical%20Disk%20Pilot%20Project&pg=PP2#v=onepage&q=Optical%20Disk%20Pilot%20Project&f=false> (accessed on April 15, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. National Endowment for the Humanities, Office of Digital Humanities, “Library of Funded Projects,” <http://www.neh.gov/ODH/ResourceLibrary/LibraryofFundedProjects/tabid/111/Default.aspx> (accessed on April 8, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Digging Into Data Challenge, “Welcome to the Challenge,” <http://www.diggingintodata.org/> (accessed on April 1, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Patricia Cohen, “A New Enlightenment: Digital Keys to the Humanities Riches, *New York Times*, November 17, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/17/arts/17digital.html> (accessed on April 15, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Alan Liu, “Digital Humanities and Academic Change,” *English Language Notes* 47 (Spring/Summer) 2009, 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Harry Ransom Center, “Preserving Born-Digital Materials,” <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/ransomedition/2010/spring/borndigital.html> (accessed on April 13, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. James G. Neal, “Prospects for Systematic Change Across Academic Libraries,” *EDUCAUSE REVIEW*, 46 (March/April) 2011, <http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE%2BReview/EDUCAUSEReviewMagazineVolume46/ProspectsforSystemicChangeacro/226178> (accessed on April 7, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. James J. O’Donnell, “Engaging the Humanities: The Digital Humanities,” *Daedalus* 101 (1) 2009, 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Roman de la Rose, “Project History,” <http://romandelarose.org/#project> (accessed on April 3, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Yale Modernism Lab, “About the Yale Modernism Lab,” <http://modernism.research.yale.edu/about.php> (accessed on April 3, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Hitoshi Kamada, “Digital Humanities: Roles for Libraries?” *College and Research Libraries News,* October 2010, 485. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See “Brown University Library Employment Opportunities,” <http://library.brown.edu/about/employment.php#humanities> (accessed on April 10, 2011) and “York University Academic Employment Opportunities,” <http://webapps.yorku.ca/academichiringviewer/viewposition.jsp?positionnumber=1186> (accessed on April 10, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. University of Victoria, “Digital Humanities Summer Institute,” <http://www.dhsi.org/> (accessed on April 10, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. “Tri-Co Digital Humanities,” <http://www.brynmawr.edu/tdh/> (accessed on April 12, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Rare Book School, “Course Descriptions,” <http://www.rarebookschool.org/courses/> (accessed on April 15, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. William A. Kretzschmar and William Gray Potter, “Library Collaboration with Large Digital Humanities Projects,” *Library and Linguistic Computing* 25 (3) 2010, 440. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Marc Perry, “The Humanities Go Google,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 10, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-Go-Google/65713/> (accessed on April 12, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. O’Donnell, “Engaging the Humanities,” 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)