Information Sources Review for the Digital Humanities Community
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Abstract
The university librarian digital humanities (DH) community has formed to meet the needs of scholars working in the burgeoning field of the digital humanities. Rather than operating on a “service” model where university librarians seek to meet the needs of humanities scholars, digital humanities librarians are seen as colleagues in DH work. A series of blogs, peer-reviewed publications, and books have been published to meet the needs of librarians working with, or interested in, DH. This paper examines two information sources associated with DH librarian scholarship: DH + Lib, a non-peer-reviewed publication “where librarians, archivists, LIS graduate students, and information specialists of all stripes can contribute to a conversation about digital humanities and libraries,” and *Digital Humanities in the Library: Challenges and Opportunities for Subject Specialists*, a peer-reviewed book published by the American Library Association. This paper finds that Digital Humanities scholarship disrupts the traditional information cycle by the community’s use of open-access and non-peer-reviewed sources to exchange information based on reputation and institutional cache.

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Introduction

The Digital Humanities (DH), “an area of research and teaching at the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities,” is a vibrant, international community that has been supported in the United States by the National Endowment for the Humanities’ (NEH) “Office of Digital Humanities” since 2008 (Wikipedia). It is a culture supported by various funding agencies in Europe, Canada, and the United States, as well as over a hundred training institutes, most notably, the Digital Humanities Summer School @ Oxford, the Gottingen Summer School in Germany, and the Digital Humanities Summer Institute in Victoria, BC, Canada.

As more and more humanities departments adopt the methodologies of DH, which may include topic modelling, Text Encoding, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and digital editions, university librarians are faced with new challenges in how to collaborate with DH initiatives. Moreover, many DH centres are located in university libraries, the reasons for which are neatly articulated by Bethany Nowviskie (2011) in her talk, “A Skunk in the Library.” However, one reason DH has flourished in the library that isn’t articulated in this article is that, in traditional university structures, humanities departments often compete for the same funding and students. The library is often seen as an institutionally neutral space where collaboration can occur outside of the traditional funding structures of the university. Librarians also have training in Usability (UX), Preservation, and Access, which are issues also studied by the DH community. Nowviskie argues that DH has changed the relationship librarians have traditionally had with humanities scholars from one based on a “service” model to one based on “collaboration.”
I currently teach Digital Humanities at the University of Victoria, where I work closely with librarians in the Digital Scholarship Unit in grant writing, teaching, and preservation. Just as DH has revolutionized humanistic inquiry in the university, librarians are also having to adapt to changing scholarship modalities—especially in the humanities. As a result, an information community of librarians interested in, and working with, DH projects has formed in order to share experiences, scholarship, and information. What make this community particularly interesting is that—since it tends to be publically funded—it has a commitment to open-access publishing. Its flagship journals, *The Journal of Digital Humanities*, *The Digital Humanities Quarterly*, and *Digital Studies/le Champ Numérique*, are peer-reviewed journals that are freely available online, and thus, it is embedded in new “reference and informational genres.” Thomas Mann (2011) defines “reference and informational genres” as types of literature that are distinctively formatted in such a way as to expedite the discovery of particular kinds of information. Such genres include almanacs, atlases, chronologies, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and so on, that usually present informational content in brief, segmented displays, rather than in connected narratives or continuous expositions. (4470)

The definition of “informational genres” must be expanded to include the forms through which Digital Humanities scholars communicate, which include Twitter, open-access journals (peer-reviewed), and websites that are not necessarily peer-reviewed, but still have a community caché associated with them. Thus, in order to do an “ informational sources review,” I would like to first challenge the idea of traditional informational structures articulated by Mann in his article, especially since traditional publishing structures are being contested by open-access models.
Trevor Muñoz, the Assistant Dean for Digital Humanities Research at the University of Maryland Libraries, writes,

“Publishing” has assumed a large role in discussions of how scholarship is changing. One reason is that, in these discussions, the mechanisms of publishing come to stand in for the larger and more complex processes of creating, vetting, and circulating knowledge. Some of the sense of unmet need that arises in considerations of the emerging, alternative publishing methods for those working in digital humanities comes from the problems with this shorthand.

Munoz rightly argues that one cannot seemingly separate the concerns on the DH information community from the affairs of the publishing industry. In short, Digital Humanities Librarian communities exist at the intersection of traditional print culture and online community-generated information sources. The community seeks information affecting humanities scholarship as well as information about how libraries can contribute to the preservation of and access to this research.

**Resource Examination**

For this assignment, I identified a web-based community-based source, DH + LIB, and a peer-reviewed, research-based source, the American Library Association publication, *Digital Humanities in the Library: Challenges and Opportunities for Subject Specialists*.

**Community-Based Source**


According to “About” section of the DH + LIB website, the site was started in 2012 having grown out of an Association of College Research Libraries (ACRL) discussion listserv, Digital Humanities Discussion Group (DH DG). Its founders wanted to create a “public venue
for discussion” and wanted to “provide a communal space where librarians, archivists, LIS graduate students, and information specialists of all stripes can contribute to a conversation about digital humanities and libraries.”

The site occupies multiple positions within the beginning stages of the information cycle: it includes up-to-the minute information in it’s twitter feed, which resides on the right-hand side of the page. Otherwise, the site is updated weekly with both original content as well as reposts from conferences.

The scope of the publication pertains to information of interest to librarians across the globe. The DH community is particularly invested in being inclusive, both in terms of racial and gendered power-structures, but also technological power structures as well (for example, “Around the World in DH” sought to explore different communities’ access to computers and the internet affect scholarship: DH in Cuba is different from DH in Canada). Since the site is updated weekly, the information provided to the community tends to be up-to-date and topical, and includes conference proceedings and important news.

The issue of credentials is an interesting. Although DH + LIB is not “peer-reviewed,” per se, it is a professional site in which people’s names are directly associated with their writing. In the academic world, one’s reputation is very important, and thus, one has an interest in not saying anything that might prove incorrect under scrutiny. Moreover, one might not want to say anything that will upset one’s future job prospects. Thus, the overall purpose of the site is to inform users of topical subjects and to keep them up-to-date with developments within the field. This is also the publication’s limitation.

Because reputation is so important within the academic community, and since DH + LIB is not peer-reviewed, writers might feel an obligation to not say anything controversial. Critique
is an important part of scholarship, but without the peer-review mechanism in place, writers are solely responsible for the things they say (whereas a peer-review article would be approved by two readers and an editor). This is perhaps the one downside to “The User-Generated Web” explored by Andrew J. Flanagin et al. Finally, the site is sponsored by the American Library Association, so it does tend to have an overwhelmingly American focus.

**Research-Based Source**


This timely resource is published by the American Library Association and provides information specifically curated for subject specialists in the library. The source fits into the “years” after the event category of the information cycle since it is a book that has gone through the entire book publication cycle.

The scope and content of the publication is addressed to everyone on the DH spectrum: it includes chapters from those for non-technical users (“Digital Humanities for the Rest of Us”) to those interested in corpus linguistics. The scope and content is limited to the research library in North America—it might not be useful to the community librarian or to libraries that do not have subject specialists; moreover, the examples provided come from United States institutions (another example of its limitations).

The intended audience are those subject specialists who might be interested in starting a DH program at their institution, or who want to expand their understanding of DH projects. For example, one chapter deals with queer culture within the DH community. But this also suggests this publication’s limitations: it is written for the university research librarian system.
Comparison of Sources

It is difficult to make clear distinctions between community-generated and peer-reviewed information sources in the DH community for two reasons: first, the community, though growing, is still fairly small; most people know each other through various training camps, and thus, there is a vested interest in not saying anything unprofessional. Those in the DH community tend to think of all writing as professional writing. Second, the information cycle seems to be self-contained in that blog posts routinely turn into articles, which are then included in books. This suggests that there is no such thing as a simple blog post: we generally write with the hope that our work will be discussed, critiqued, and shared in other open publication venues.

The two formats also mirror the speed at which humanities scholarship is changing. The algorithms that drive topic analysis might change one year to the next, and thus, the information cycle must keep up with these changes—and websites are exceptionally good at reflecting these quick changes). But DH is also a new discipline, and thus it seeks the codification of traditional print structures as well. It tends to thrive in universities, so peer-reviewed books are also important parts of the information cycle.

Conclusion.

Mary Ann Harlan et al. write that “we interpret information literacy as the experience of using information to learn.” Because DH is a relatively new field, it is necessary to have both quick and slow publications in the information cycle to inform readers of developments and standards as they develop. Since computers are always changing, those of us involved in DH are always learning, and thus rely on websites, blogs, as well as books to keep up-to-date in our field. Rather than creating hierarchies, we have created communities of trust where certain librarians, scholars, etc., who readily share their experiences, become experts—whether or not
they are publishing on a blog or in a book. The weakness of this system is that it depends on trust, but in a very human world of gate-keeping and so-called “disinterested” peer-review, this has always been the case. But perhaps this is the very definition of what makes a community work: faith in one another.
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