

**A NOTE ON THIS VERSION:**

**This version of the article was submitted to American Libraries Magazine on November 12, 2015. It is significantly edited from the original draft that was turned into the magazine and slightly different from the version published in the Jan/Feb 2016 issue of American Libraries.**

**For more information about the various versions see:**

**<https://stewartvarner.com/2016/01/04/um-about-that-american-libraries-article-we-wrote/>**

.....

**Digital Humanities in Libraries**

By Patricia Hswe and Stewart Varner

Contemporary research in the humanities has expanded beyond anything that could be considered traditional. Historians are building interactive digital maps, literary scholars are using computers to look for patterns across millions of books, and scholars in all disciplines are taking advantage of the internet to make their work more dynamic and visually engaging.

Digital humanities (DH) is the umbrella term that describes much of this work. It is neither a field, a discipline, nor a methodology. It is not simply the humanities done with computers, nor is it computer science performed on topics of interest to the humanities. DH is the result of a dynamic dialogue between emerging technology and humanistic inquiry. For some, it is a scholarly community of practice that is engaged in a wide variety of projects but that collectively values experimentation, collaboration, and making. For others, it is a contentious label that signifies elitism and is characterized by a fetishization of technology and a lack of critical reflection. However it is defined, DH has had a significant impact on the academic landscape for more than a decade.

Libraries and librarians have played a crucial role in the story of DH. From the earliest days, librarians were eager partners on collaborative digitization projects, and now they can be found negotiating text mining rights with researchers and vendors, hosting open access journals, and making room for makerspaces within their buildings. We have been such valuable collaborators over the years because the values of librarianship inform a deep interest in information access, a concern for information preservation, and a desire to make room for our diverse user communities. Yet despite this ongoing engagement, libraries are often unsure how they should respond as DH attracts more and more practitioners and its definition evolves to cover an ever-expanding range of techniques and methods.

This uncertainty is illustrated by the responses to a survey conducted by database publisher Gale Cengage and *American Libraries*. The survey reveals that an overwhelming 97% of libraries agree that DH materials and project outcomes should be held in library collections. However, only half (51%) reported that consultations about initial project development are an important way librarians are helping users engage in DH projects. The survey found that 17% of responding libraries say there are no digital scholarship services at their institutions, while 41% described their digital scholarship services as merely ad hoc. Not surprisingly, among the libraries that are actively engaged in DH, activities vary widely. Some have limited their engagement with DH to digital collections, while 19% have built expansive DH centers. All of this has had implications for staffing as well, with 21% of respondents reporting that they have created special positions such as digital humanities librarian, while others are cross-training existing staff to be project collaborators.

Regardless of a library's particular approach, it is tempting to think of DH in terms of services to be offered or as a field to be supported with specific resources. While this is understandable, it also places libraries in the role of service provider at the exact moment where it is not clear what services would even be useful. Given the speed at which DH is evolving and the degree of ambiguity and uncertainty that surrounds it, it may be more productive—and more honest—to position the library as research partner that can explore new solutions with researchers rather than a service provider that either has what a researcher is looking for or doesn't.

The survey suggests that most librarians would prefer this model as well, with 63% of those surveyed reporting that they believe the primary role of a DH librarian should be as full-fledged project collaborator and participant.

### **How libraries are doing digital humanities**

While DH is evolving, certain types of projects have become common ways for libraries and researchers to collaborate.

*Digital scholarly publishing.* One of the most prominent examples of scholarly publishing in DH is the digital edition (sometimes known as digital scholarly edition or digital archive). Many libraries are already equipped with the basics for launching researchers on a digital edition project, such as scanning equipment; optical character recognition software for enhancing the accuracy of scanned text and making it editable, searchable, and encodable (via the extensible markup language, or XML); and guidance on tools for XML editing and transformation to make the output human-readable. Methods like text encoding enable critical, editorial, and scholarly explorations not otherwise possible.

Digital editions often adhere to accepted standards for encoding, such as the guidelines provided by the [Text Encoding Initiative \(TEI\)](#), active since 1987. Examples of digital edition projects that

are library-based collaborations with faculty and students include the [Victorian Women Writers Project](#), based at the Indiana University Libraries in Bloomington; and the [Shelley-Godwin Archive](#), a partnership between the New York Public Library and the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (based in the University of Maryland Libraries in College Park).

*Digital libraries and digital collections.* Libraries are also deploying digital collections in myriad file formats, essentially as data, to allow downloading en masse and, in turn, expedite submission to computational or other methods for analysis, modeling, and visualization. Stripping digital collections down to core components could render everything old new again in terms of what libraries might offer to the humanities research community.

A leading example of an initiative providing this type of multiformat access is [DocSouth Data](#), an extension of the [Documenting the American South](#) project, hosted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries. The representation of digital collections in various data formats may lead to creative programs and partnerships for instruction, collection development and strategy (as suggested in the section on text mining below, as well), digitization, and training or “skilling up” opportunities for both librarians and researchers, including students, to name just a few possibilities.

*Text mining.* In 2001, Italian literary scholar Franco Moretti introduced the phrase “distant reading” into literature studies as a way to describe work that used computers to study larger numbers of books than he could reasonably read. The name is a play on “close reading,” carefully analyzing the nuances in a single passage. Moretti’s distant reading looks not at a single passage or even a single book but the literature of an entire nation in an attempt to see common features, distinctive patterns, and signs of evolution. Libraries can be critical partners in this work. For example, scholars are often limited in what they can study by the availability of machine-readable texts. Librarians are negotiating for access to digital collections that facilitates distant reading and making sure their own collections are accessible as well. Library instruction sessions are also expanding to include training on tools and techniques for text analysis.

*Digital pedagogy.* Whether it takes the form of a one-shot session or an ongoing, embedded relationship, class-based library instruction is a common responsibility for librarians. At the most basic, library instruction sessions give students the essentials of how to find library resources; librarians often go beyond this and develop complex assignments with instructors that are designed to give students experience doing deep research. Emerging technology is making it easier than ever to expand these kinds of assignments so that students not only engage in meaningful research but also develop original projects that can be shared online. For example, students can contextualize their research temporally and spatially by incorporating their findings into digital timelines or online maps. Thanks to freely available content-management tools like Omeka, classes can easily build online exhibits that allow them to tell stories with primary

source material. Assignments like this can be an engaging way for students to connect with library resources and help them develop new skills.

### **Common characteristics**

Many libraries are currently providing excellent examples of how to go beyond being a service provider by becoming a valuable research partner. These libraries share certain characteristics: They encourage their librarians to stay engaged with both their users and their peers, they build on existing strengths, and they aren't afraid to experiment.

*1. Stay engaged.* Because people define DH differently, librarians must be engaged with their communities. Librarians need to know what kinds of projects interest researchers and what is holding them back. Thomas Padilla, digital scholarship librarian at Michigan State University (MSU) Libraries in East Lansing, found that his users who were interested in text mining said that “getting access to data and learning how to work with it is a challenge.” For Padilla, this provides an opportunity for librarians to “add additional value to their collections by treating them as data and helping their communities work with them as such.”

Engagement should also expand to the global networks of researchers and librarians at other institutions, who can be vital sources of ideas, inspiration, and support. Librarians may find that their local communities are unsure where to start thinking about incorporating technology into their work and could benefit from seeing examples. Staying connected to other librarians and digital humanists via social media and professional organizations is a great way to learn about what people are working on and how they are dealing with common challenges. Sarah Potvin, co-editor in chief at *dh+lib* and digital scholarship librarian at Texas A&M in College Station, highlights the value of these networks, describing digital humanities as “a community of learners, where no one person or group can wield total authority or knowledge. It's that spirit—of learning and curiosity, of looking at questions from such different disciplinary angles—that I find most welcoming and fruitful.”

*2. Play to your strengths.* While it may seem like a new direction for libraries, getting involved in DH can be a great way for librarians to build on what they do best: working with users on research projects and helping students learn valuable research skills. Laurie Allen, coordinator for digital scholarship and services at Haverford (Pa.) College, says that “library organizations already include people who are fluent in so many parts of DH: Reference librarians understand scholarship, are good listeners, and know their communities; catalogers understand how to organize information; and technologists can figure out how tools work, and how to improve upon them.” The Gale Cengage/*American Libraries* survey supports Allen's assertion, noting that libraries are leveraging their best-known strengths for DH, including preservation assistance, metadata enhancement, and accommodation of digital objects in institutional repositories.

Just as DH produces new forms of scholarship, it also demands new research skills. This gives librarians an opportunity to expand their role in instruction. To this end, Padilla and colleagues in the library at Michigan State received a small grant from the Association for Computers and the Humanities “to bring together disciplinary faculty and librarians from around the state of Michigan to test the utility of cross walking Association of College and Research Libraries’ Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, competencies from the Data Information Literacy Project, and disciplinary learning competencies in order to design more effective digital humanities instruction.” The team at MSU learned that by working collaboratively, they were able to “foster mutually beneficial conversations about digital humanities instruction design between librarians and disciplinary faculty.”

*3. Don’t be afraid to experiment.* While librarians will find that their core strengths are vital to DH work, new tools and techniques are constantly emerging. Allen, reflecting on her experiences working with students at Haverford, says, “The more our libraries can build our technical, labor, and administrative infrastructures to facilitate experimentation, the easier DH will be.”

Unfortunately, experimentation is sometimes one of the hardest things for libraries to do because it resists standardization, often requires additional spending, and raises difficult questions about long-term preservation. While there are certainly ways to experiment thoughtfully by managing expectations and making informed decisions about tools and methods, embracing experimentation also means embracing the possibility of failure. Potvin says, “By acknowledging that failure itself can be productive, instructive, I think we are freeing ourselves and our institutions to embrace change and all the bumps and knocks that may accompany it.”

### **Looking ahead**

In capturing how libraries and librarians are contributing to digital humanities at their institutions, it’s important to note how much community engagement goes hand in hand with building capacity for DH. Indeed, more than 40% of survey respondents said their libraries are advocating for coordinated, cross-campus support for digital humanities. The interdisciplinarity of projects, which almost three-quarters of survey respondents confirmed their libraries encourage and facilitate, can also generate a sense of community.

At the same time, there are signs that a better understanding of libraries’ roles in digital humanities projects is needed; most librarians claimed their organizations to not have a policy or written statement that characterizes the support they provide for DH activities. Funding sources are also an issue. If DH succeeds best when it’s a communal effort at institutions, even inter-institutionally, then the responsibility for funding it should be more evenly distributed across those involved. Performing a needs assessment or an environmental scan can help clarify what the appropriate responses and approaches should be.

Almost as key is a willingness to participate in a culture of experimentation and, thus, of openness to failure as a learning opportunity. Not every project undertaken needs to go down the path of production.