Information seeking in the Humanities: Physicality and Digitality.

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ABSTRACT  
This paper presents a brief overview of a research project that is examining the information seeking practices of humanities scholars. The results of this project are being used to develop digital resources to better support these work activities. Initial findings from a recent set of interviews is offered, revealing the importance of physical artefacts in the humanities scholars’ research processes and the limitations of digital resources. Finally, further work that is soon to be undertaken is summarised, and it is hoped that after participation in this workshop these ideas will be refined.

INTERVIEWS WITH HUMANITIES SCHOLARS  
Over the past few months interviews have been conducted with scholars from English, History and Religious Studies departments from London, Cambridge, Bangkok and Sydney. These interviews have discussed scholars’ research experiences, in some cases over forty years, and how technologies have been introduced that can facilitate (or hinder) their work, or the work of their students. The themes that have been emerging from these interviews begin to reveal the importance of physical artefacts in their work and some of the benefits and limitations of electronic equivalents and support tools.

This work is on going and initial analysis has revealed some interesting themes that are shaping further studies. Here is an overview of some of the themes extracted so far:

Insights into the positive and negative aspects of the Humanities ‘research experience’
Detailed descriptions of their research activities revealed the “Sherlock Holmes” nature of their work; how it develops across the use of many sources and how the ‘mystery’ is investigated by ‘chasing up leads’. Additionally, the depths of engagement experienced during interaction with the actual source materials were described. So for example, hunting down a rare 16th Century book in a second hand shop and slowly leafing through it over the weekend was described as a highly pleasurable, personal experience. This poses a significant design challenge: How can digital resources best support the work of the research ‘Sleuth’ and how can the experience of doing so be enhanced to facilitate engagement whilst interacting with technology?

The Physical and the Digital (Real and Virtual)
Different experiences in a variety of physical libraries were discussed, and how these research experiences differed to...
the use of electronic resources was also explored. We shall
be addressing how some of the qualities of the physical
browsing activity can be best supported by electronic
resources. This is being done by developing, prototyping
and testing interfaces that offer additional information to
the user in a variety of ways, such as statistics on article
use, related material, and similar search pathways through
the data.

Space, place and people

The importance of, and problems of, places (libraries,
auction houses, book fairs), spaces (e.g. working in
particular libraries) and the relationships with other people
were also revealing. These findings can be set against
electronic resources to see how well they support or hinder
these relationships. Do these technologies need to consider
ways of incorporating additional communication tools to
support research communities?

How resources are assessed

The criteria scholars used to evaluate resources were often
implicit. These interviews revealed issues of accuracy and
ease of use for both physical and electronic resources. Our
prototyped interfaces are exploring ways of expressing, for
example, how results are ranked and how the user can
interact with the system in order to present the data
according to their own preferences.

Embracing technology

Participants discussed how different sorts of technology
fitted into their research practices over the last twenty-five
years, including first use of email, and more recently the
Web and electronic resources.

Problems with technologies old and new

Critiques were offered of microfiche, microfilm, CD Roms
as well as library catalogues and Internet search engines. By
understanding barriers to previous technological take up in
general, improved techniques can be developed to promote
these resources to the Humanities research community.

NEXT STEPS

Offering accounts of how humanities scholars work, and
the role of physical artefacts in their research endeavours,
are important for the future of computing in the Humanities.
With a better understanding of their work in context and
with how current technologies support or hinder their
research practice will help to develop and refine supporting
technological tools.

Humanities scholars often require the context and full text
of the original documents whereas other disciplines are
concerned more with the content, regardless of the
structure. However, increasingly humanities scholars are
using digital resources as a means of accelerating their
information searching habits as well as using digitised
artefacts.

The next piece of research will be a case study of
humanities PhD students that will shadow them through
information gathering tasks, paying particular attention to
the shifts between the physical and the digital. For example,
from the initial documenting of ideas to the use of digital
resources such as the Internet and online library catalogues,
to note paper and physical library shelf searching through to
writing up and search refining. It is hoped that this will
draw up a clearer picture of how well existing practices
work and how future digital resources could better
compliment the research practices of the humanities
scholar. Additionally, we expect to gain a deeper
understanding of the “research experience” and of the
qualities (and importance) of the physical in their work
activities.

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Project Website

http://www.uclic.ucl.ac.uk/people/a.blandford/DLUsability/
UCIS.html