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Digital Humanities and the Library: Research Partners?

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1. Introduction

Digital Humanities and the Library or the Library and the Digital Humanities, how and why does this seemingly apparent partnership seem to work. This paper builds on previous scholarship analysing the connection between the library and digital humanities (DH), looks at how this connection has developed, and what appear to be notable differences within this relationship in different geographical areas and cultures. It positions itself within ongoing discussions about the role of the library in the digital era (Sula, 2013; Muñoz, 2016; Kamposiori, 2017; Ruan and Du, 2020; Evidence Base, 2021) and contributes to our understanding of this relationship.

To put this in the wider historic context, we should consider the ancient links between the library and scholarship itself and its place within the humanistic tradition. Looking back to the earliest writings gathered together as private or, perhaps more accurately, royal collections and ancient repositories of knowledge, as a means to increase prestige and importance, as well as perhaps bringing scholars together. Thinking here particularly of Pergamum and Alexandria with the latter having the poet and philosopher Callimachus as librarian/archivist, with his poetry picked up by the poets of the late Roman Republic and Augustan era, consolidating that relationship between the library and humanistic scholarship; or more correctly, simply the relationship with scholarship as the ancients would not have recognised the academic demarcations that exist for us as those are modern constructs (Irwin, 1989). Earlier collections existed but were personal in nature whereas the library of Alexandria was 'comprehensive, embracing books of all sorts from everywhere, and [importantly] it was public, open to anyone with fitting scholarly or literary qualifications.' (Casson, 2001 p.31). So not open to everyone but, like a university library, open to anyone with the appropriate affiliation rather than the public library of today.

Beyond this, DH scholars have acknowledged the significant role that libraries play.

> *Of all scholarly pursuits, Digital Humanities most clearly represents the spirit that animated the ancient foundations at Alexandria, Pergamum, and Memphis, the great monastic libraries of the Middle Ages, and even the first research libraries of the German Enlightenment. It is obsessed with varieties of representation, the organization of knowledge, the technology of communication and dissemination, and the production of useful tools for scholarly inquiry. (Ramsay, 2010)*

The relevance here is that we have a connection extending back millennia for the gathering, storing, archiving, conservation, and preservation of knowledge – the record of human achievement. There is also the link between the development of technology and scholarly enquiry leading to knowledge

production, from the written word and scribal practice to printing, followed by the ones and zeros that generate the content that populates our computer screens and smartphones. With the introduction of the digital turn (Westera, 2012), leading to what we now understand as the DH, we have new tools and methodologies, but our aims are the same as those ancient librarians with one exception; these technologies allow the dissemination of material in digital form on a scale that was previously unprecedented and unimaginable. Moreover, they allow us to dig more deeply into our sources, explore meaning at scale, to uncover and disseminate new knowledge that would otherwise not be possible.

We may no longer have the risk of a retreating emperor destroying an entire collection in a single blaze (Empereur, 2008), but we are still subject to the vagaries of natural forces and other disasters such as hurricanes Katrina and Harvey (ALA, 2006; Eberhart, 2017), the fire at the National Museum of Brazil (Domingues da Silva, 2019), or human ideological intervention such as at the libraries of Sarajevo, Timbuktu, and Mosul (Singer, 2015). Electronic media is especially vulnerable in the long term particularly with issues around uncertainty concerning the responsibility for preservation. There are well documented problems and concerns over significant issues surrounding the long-term preservation of electronic material to ensure the accessibility and usability of the material over time (Laakso et al., 2021). In addition, there are always and will always be concerns about hardware and software failure, the licencing of proprietary software, and funding availability for sustainability with precarious institutional budgets. The long-term preservation of digital material has been of concern within the library domain since the advent of the medium (Greenhall, 2019; Evidence Base, 2021). Similarly, preservation over time and ensuring continued access to digital resources are key issues for UNESCO's guidelines on Open Access (Swan, 2012) and the Memory of the World, particularly for documentary heritage (UNESCO MoW, n.d.).

Although there is no single definition of DH on which everyone can agree, indeed some practitioners self-consciously avoid such attempts (Terras et al, 2013; Mahony, 2018a), in general it involves 'applying computer-based technology in the humanities' (Berry, 2019), and 'aims to transform how the artefacts (such as manuscripts) and the phenomena [...] that the Humanities study can be encountered, transmitted, questioned, interpreted, problematized and imagined.' (Nyhan and Flinn, 2016. p.1). Arguably, the DH framework is not so much a 'consensus' as an agreement by practitioners 'to participate in a common conversation' (Liu, 2016, p.1549). Simply put, DH practitioners are those working in the space where the digital and the humanities come together. It is not our wish to engage further in any attempt at defining the practice of DH; indeed, doing so creates artificial barriers such as our current academic demarcations that suit institutional administration rather than cooperation and collaboration. Moreover, in saying what something is, it is also saying what it is not, being exclusive rather than inclusive. Nevertheless, just as the scribes of the ancient libraries (followed by the monastic tradition) devoted their time to the organising and copying of manuscripts (Alexandria being helped by an abundance of papyrus), so the DH spends much effort on creating surrogates of original work through the digitisation of text, images, and artifacts. Libraries and knowledge production have always been inextricably linked with scholarship and the scholarly community (Mahony, 2018b). Our discussion about this partnership between DH and the library is to contribute towards a better understanding of that relationship and its variations.

The research presented here reflects the authors' institutional academic training and experience of working in the UK and Chinese contexts. Hence the analysis is limited to the Anglophone sphere and

Chinese mainland while acknowledging the limitations as other geo-linguistic areas are not included. Positionality is often overlooked (Colón-Aguirre and Bright, 2022) and acknowledged here to clarify our research parameters with regards to diversity and inclusion.

2. A Brief and Focussed Literature Review

Essentially, it is humanities problems, aspects of human endeavour and achievement, cultural artefacts and their interpretation, whether historical, literary, philological, or more recently within the areas of social studies, media, and so on, that DH scholars and librarians endeavour to engage with. The library itself, the library provisions, and librarians themselves are central to research projects in the humanities and beyond. Nevertheless, the models for DH centres, research groups and their relationship with the library vary across institutions. Much depends on how the centre evolved, being set up as a research centre in its own right or evolving from a service provider, as well as the individual institutional structures, administration, and management infrastructure.

The research interests may also vary across centres.

> *Some centers focus explicitly on digital humanities; some engage the humanities but are organized around media studies, or code studies […]. North American centers tend to arise from the bottom up, European and Asian centers from the top down. North American centers tend to focus exclusively on humanities and, sometimes, the interpretive social sciences. European and Asian centers are more likely to be dispersed through the disciplines, or to be organized as virtual rather than physically located centers (Fraistat, 2012. p. 283).*

This snapshot of typical centres does, of course and understandably, not consider the most recent ones. Nevertheless, what is certainly clear is that,

> *[f]or digital humanities projects, collaboration is essential as no individual scholar or practitioner, working on their own, has all the skills necessary for such an enterprise. This is true of other disciplinary fields as well, but particularly so with the digital humanities. (Mahony, 2020. p.100)*

Moreover, there appears to be a clear synergy between DH and the libraries within the job market. Data harvested from *Digital Humanities Now* concerning job advertisements in the USA that include the keywords 'DH' or 'digital humanities', appears to confirm this.[1]

> *The words "digital scholarship" […] and "librarian" […] appeared more frequently in [advertisements for] academic library positions; this finding suggests that a digital scholarship service model is common among libraries developing support for DH and that DH librarians are expected to engage with the development, implementation, and support of DH research and pedagogy. (Walsh et al., 2021, p.9)*

In addition, the analysis 'shows a number of required or desired [employment] competencies' within the data and digital domains that are shared between DH and library professionals (Walsh et al, 2021, p.13). From a librarian's perspective DH research can arguably be 'core to the theory and practice of librarianship in its own terms rather than as a useful lever in some temporary tactical manoeuvre […] digital humanities in the library can and should be a source of ideas', a relationship rather than a service and one where librarians help to shape the future of DH research (Muñoz, 2016, p.11).

Furthermore, collaborations between DH and the libraries maximise the benefit to both by breaking down the (sometime perceived and sometime actual) institutional divisions between the two, what could be described as the tension between the service orientation of the library and the individual research focus of humanities scholars. DH helps to overcome this tension with outward looking research and more of a focus on methodology, accessibility, usability, and of making work available to all through open standards and initiatives, which makes DH a good match for libraries and an equal symbiotic partnership.

> *The specialty area of digital humanities is a natural space for librarians to engage in. The role of librarian is evolving into a profession where progressively more content is moving onto online platforms and an understanding of the tools and techniques of digital humanities would enable this transition. (Burns, 2016 p.339)*

Overall, regarding the centres themselves, there are similarities and differences.

> *While there is a strong family resemblance between digital humanities centers, almost every center differs in its formal character [...]. Some are freestanding institutes, administered at faculty or university level; others form parts of existing academic departments, in disciplines ranging from literature to library studies; some are academic departments in their own right; others are treated as support services and are part of the library or computing services. (Prescott, 2015. p.465)*

3. Discussion

As above, not all DH centres have the same model, and we can recognise several distinct variants. In the UK there are DH research centres that are themselves departments (Department of Digital Humanities (DDH) at King's College London); the University of Glasgow has a DH Network spanning several departments; virtual DH centres that cross department and faculty divides such as the UCL Centre for Digital Humanities (UCLDH); research centres that have grown and developed from the library but have the organisational status of a department, University of Sheffield, Digital Humanities Institute (DHI).

In North America we can see a similar mix of different models but often with a closer connection to the institutional library. The Center for Digital Research in the Humanities at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln 'is a joint initiative of [the] Libraries and the College of Arts and Sciences'. When the (US) Center for Institutional Cooperation (CIC) held its first DH Summit at Nebraska–Lincoln in 2012, 'sixty faculty, librarians, and administrators' came together as participants (Keener, 2015, p.2). The Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH) is 'jointly supported by the [...] College of Arts and Humanities and the [...] Libraries'. The Scholars Lab, at the University of Virginia, 'the UVA Library's community lab for the practice of experimental scholarship', is an example of an institutional initiative where 'successful collaborations between librarians and DH scholars have been developed' (Kamposiori 2017, p.6). Writing in 2013 Sula noted that DH centres hosted by institutional libraries are 'much less common' outside the USA (Sula, 2013, p.18).

The Canadian model differs again: the University of Alberta has acknowledged experts with strong DH research profiles that cross several departments, and a teaching programme but no dedicated DH centre. Similarly, the University of Victoria, which runs the Digital Humanities Summer Institute, includes notable DH practitioners, has their Humanities Computing and Media Centre which develops

prestigious projects as well as supporting the Faculty of Humanities with services and resources but no specified DH centre.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive (and there are many other examples we could give) but rather to illustrate a range of various models. It is also clear that, with no single agreed definition of the fundamental priorities of DH, the nature and practice of the DH scholarship created varies, so consequently the institutional support, relationship, and partnership with the library and librarians also varies.

> *A DH center does not always meet the needs of DH researchers [and] a DH center is not necessarily best located in the library. […] A handful of models demonstrate successful collaborations with digital humanists, but one size does not fit all. (Schaffner and Erway, 2014, p.5)*

All of these institutions mentioned above have DH teaching whether that is full programmes, individual, or short courses. There is a clear link with all these examples between research and teaching (the well-used phrase 'research-led teaching') just as in the UK with, for example, the UCL Department of Information Studies, King's DDH, and also where the model is a hybrid one such as at Sheffield (DHI). Teaching, as well as generating predictable student income to make the centre less vulnerable by demonstrating its financial value, helps to establish academic credibility within the wider institution. Nevertheless, much of DH, in the early days of development in the UK and North America, grew out of a background of service computing (Warwick, 2012). For example, DDH at King's College London developed (in 2011) from what was previously the Centre for Computing in the Humanities (founded in 1992) which in turn grew from 'a joint initiative of the School of Humanities and Information Services & Systems, beginning in 1988'.

In mainland China[2], the model is again a mixed one with the setting up of the first DH centre at the University of Wuhan, Department of Information Management, in 2011, followed by those at the universities of Nanjing, Peking, Renmin, Shanghai Normal, and several others. Despite the scholarly context in China being 'starkly different from where the digital humanities originated' (Chen and Tsui, 2022. p.71), there are considerable similarities regarding the early days of mass digitisation and construction of online scholarly resources (Mahony and Gao, 2019). These were, however, usually developed by Library Science and Information Studies rather than DH. This often resulted in a gap between the providers and the users of DH resources as they had been 'constructed by libraries, archives, and companies, and usually promoted by librarian and scholars in the fields of library science and information studies rather than humanities researchers' (Chen and Tsui, 2022. p.74). Again, just as with the UK and North America, there is a connection between DH research and teaching; undergraduate taught DH courses emerged at Nanjing University, Department of History in 2016 (Tsui, 2020), and the first full Master's programme was launched at Renmin University in 2020.

In universities in the UK, North America, and mainland China there is a clear link between DH research and teaching within the framework of the academic departments. This is particularly apparent when you consider the iSchools connection where many of the departments with DH centres and taught DH courses are members.[3] As an organisation 'dedicated to advancing the information field' the iSchools Organization has a focus on library science and related disciplines creating a bridge between academic departments and library studies. The DH link and connection with library studies is further evidenced with the hosting of the iConference at the universities of Wuhan (2017), Sheffield (2018), and Renmin

(2021), as well as DH teaching within their iSchools and wider institutions (also in the iSchools at UCL and Glasgow).[4]

The development of pedagogy is another close relationship between DH and the library within taught DH programmes, again not as a service but as an active symbiotic partner. This works particularly well with 'Object-Based Learning' and materials from a library's 'Special Collections' used as teaching resources, supported with the specialist librarian's knowledge and expertise (Mahony et al, 2016).

As a result of this partnership,

> *librarians can build on their role as instructors and reflect the emerging identity of the library as an active and productive space on campus [...] connecting the library to digital humanities work will create new ways for users to work with library collections and give the library a low-stakes way to experiment with emerging tools. (Varner, 2016. p.220)*

The RLUK (Research Libraries UK) report (Evidence Base, 2021), set up to 'investigate the role of academic and research library staff as partners and leaders in the initiation, production and dissemination of academic and scholarly research', considers the extensive benefits to both parties, particularly with the coming together and collaboration of practitioners with wide ranging and complimentary knowledge and skill sets. The institutional library sits at the centre of the academic structure and is, as such, well placed to be an interdisciplinary partner and particularly so to make use of their central position to work across disciplinary and institutional boundaries (Evidence Base, 2021).

What is clear is that some centres, such as DDH at King's College London, grew out of service centres; that service computing was originally set up to support academic research, and that in the formative years of DH many of the research centres in the USA were 'either associated or physically based within the university library' (Warwick, 2012 p.194). In many cases this stems from the service-orientated culture of libraries and because they had the experience of supporting digital resources for scholarship as well as understanding the problems associated with data management, preservation, and institutional repositories (Warwick, 2012). In the early days, before institutional networks, the computing systems themselves would have been housed within the institution's library. An additional issue here is that the institutional context of the host organisation is not consistent and so the nature of the activities they are able to conduct are not the same. There is, again, no single pattern or model.

One of the case studies conducted by RLUK was the Sheffield University Library, where their strategy is to support 'all research and teaching at the university, including digital scholarship [...] although there is no dedicated DH team' (Kamposiori, 2017 p.20). They do, however, work in partnership with DHI, being involved in projects and particularly ones using their library collections. This support and participation in project development strengthens the research profile of the institution where the sharing of expertise and domain knowledge fills possible gaps, such as those of data preservation, use and re-use of data, and points to the benefits to both parties for such partnerships (Kamposiori, 2017. p.21).

For some centres in mainland China there is a stronger and more direct symbiosis between DH and the library. The *First DH Forum* was hosted by the Library of Peking University (PKU) in 2016 and held there

each year until 2019 (and the global pandemic), along with DH workshops from 2017 onwards (Zhao et al, 2020). The University Town Library of Shenzhen held the *International Conference on Library and Digital Humanities* in December 2017 to 'explore the role that libraries played in the development of DH' in China and beyond, including speakers from the UK and North America (Wang et al, 2020. p.13). These expert speakers included representatives from libraries, academic departments, and DH centres, and the conference concluded with a Dialogue Panel titled 'Library's Role in Digital Humanities Development', chaired by the Deputy Director of Peking University Library, and featuring panellists from Shanghai Library, the British Library, and the university libraries of California, Duke, and Stanford (Wang, 2017). This was a library orientated DH event with these panellists also giving talks in the main conference sessions. In the following year, the 9th *Shanghai International Library Forum* (SILF 2018), hosted at Shanghai Library, incorporating the Institute of Scientific and Technical Information of Shanghai, where there is a well-established DH research group, included a dedicated *Digital Scholarship and Humanistic Studies* session as well as a DH keynote. Indeed, the research from Wang et al (2020) shows that in China special attention has been paid to DH and LIS (Library and Information Studies) with a growing number of joint conferences and publications; LIS is considered by them to be 'in the vanguard of DH in China' (Wang et al, 2020. p.13).

In mainland China there is a clear connection with DH research developed from the libraries (Xia and Bao, 2020), with the main participants being those at Peking University and Shanghai Library (Wang et al, 2020). The growing awareness of this connection is indicated by the number of published papers looking at the growth of DH in China and highlighting the library connection. 'Before 2018, discussions of digital humanities in the Chinese language were predominantly authored by scholars in library and information science' (Tsui, 2020. p.209). From their research, 'statistical analysis shows that among all 275 institutes producing DH work, 239 are universities [including the institutional library], 15 are public libraries' (Wang et al, 2020. p. 25). Moreover, between 2010 and 2018, out of the 344 articles in Chinese published in the China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database with 'digital humanities (*shu zi ren wen*)' as keywords, 221 of the authors had 'a background in library science' (Tsui, 2020. p.209).

4. Conclusion

This paper looks at the relationship between DH and the library with a focus on the UK, North America, and mainland China. It looks at the similarities and differences between DH centres, research groups and their connection with the library and is very much of the view that this represents a symbiotic partnership which is of mutual benefit. The academic library has a long tradition of linking with and facilitating scholarship and knowledge production. It is generally positioned at the centre of an academic institution and is well situated to take advantage of its position to cross faculties and the artificial demarcation that modern scholarship and administration places on departments. At the same time, the library must avoid being cast solely in the role of a service provider. In the early days of DH, particularly when it was known as Humanities Computing, practitioners would have the same challenges of pushing back against the perceived 'service' orientation of their work (Bradley, 2012).

As above, there is no single model for a DH centre or research group, 'regardless of whether they are in a faculty or the library, all are different' (Mahony and Gao, 2019). What is essential and common to all, however, is the communication. For DH centres,

> *[...] the mission will be [...] to build greater connectivity and collaboration between and across existing centers, resources, and practitioners [...]. In pursuing that mission, building and creating networks is the most important activity of all. (Prescott, 2015. p. 473)*

Another common focus is on the teaching of future generations of practitioners. In mainland China it is clear that there is a more direct link between the library and DH research where it is notable that many research groups/centres are within Information Management (iSchools), the Library School, or the library itself. DH shares many of the traditions of the library with regards to preserving and celebrating the human record but with new tools and methods that allow us to dig more deeply into our sources – but those collected and curated by the library and archives. The focus on methodology, accessibility, usability, and of making material available through open standards further strengthens this partnership. Both share concerns over the long term sustainability and preservation of materials both physical and digital.

Another significant finding comes from the research by the iSchools committee on DH curriculum development which identified the synergy in the job market with 'digital scholarship' and 'librarian' appearing together frequently in the job advertisements that appeared in *Digital Humanities Now*. (Walsh et all, 2021. p.9).

In conclusion, this research is significant as it identifies and confirms the role of the library as a partner in promoting DH, implementing DH projects, and working with DH researchers. We argue that this symbiosis between the library and DH is a valuable opportunity to leverage the complementary strengths, experience, and skills of staff who have different training and backgrounds.

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1. *Digital Humanities Now* is an edited publication that aggregates and distributes information about DH. ↵

2. Note that these examples are limited to mainland China. DH has grown and scholarly communities/cultures have evolved in other parts of the Greater China region in different ways. Also, the authors' direct experience has been limited to the mainland. ↵

3. For example, see the contributors to Walsh et al (2021) ↵

4. For more on DH teaching in iSchools see Walsh et al (2021) ↵