
Executive Summary

With the wealth of digital scholarship being produced today outside of traditional publishing channels, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) sought to explore the variety of online resources currently in use by the scholarly community.

The networked digital environment has enabled the creation of many new kinds of works that are accessible to end users directly, and many of these resources have become essential tools for scholars conducting research, building scholarly networks, and disseminating their ideas and work. The decentralized distribution of these new model works can make it difficult to fully appreciate their scope and number, even for university librarians tasked with knowing about valuable resources across the disciplines. In the spring of 2008, ARL engaged Ithaka to conduct an investigation into the range of online resources valued by scholars, paying special attention to those projects that are pushing beyond the boundaries of traditional formats and are considered innovative by the faculty who use them.

A field team of librarians at ARL institutions in the US and Canada was assembled to interview faculty members on their campuses about the digital scholarly resources they find useful in their work. The field team of 301 librarians at 46 institutions interviewed professors about the digital resources they use. Ithaka staff then evaluated each resource to ensure that it met ARL's definition of "original and scholarly works," those resources containing born-digital content by and for a scholarly audience. Of the 358 responses the field team gathered,

206 unique digital resources met these criteria. These resources are included in a publicly-accessible database.¹ The final report is based on both the fact-checked results of the field study and interviews subsequently conducted by Ithaka with project leaders of eleven representative resources. This qualitative approach, while not statistically meaningful, yielded a rich cross-section of what innovation in digital scholarly resources looks like today.

The final report identifies eight principle types of digital scholarly resources:

- E-only journals
- Reviews
- Preprints and working papers
- Encyclopedias, dictionaries, and annotated content
- Data
- Blogs
- Discussion forums
- Professional and scholarly hubs

This report profiles each of these eight types of resources, including discussion of how and why the faculty members reported using the resources for their work, how content is selected for the site, and what sustainability strategies the resources are employing. Each section draws from the in-depth interviews to provide illustrative anecdotes and highlight representative examples.

¹ The database is available at: <http://www.arl.org/sc/models/model-pubs/search-form.shtml>

Among the findings of this study were:

- While some disciplines seem to lend themselves to certain formats of digital resource more than others, examples of innovative resources can be found across the humanities, social sciences, and scientific/technical/medical subject areas.
- Traditions of scholarly culture relating to establishing scholarly legitimacy through credentialing, peer review, and citation metrics exert a powerful force on these innovative online projects. Almost every resource suggested by the interviewed scholars incorporates peer review or editorial oversight. Though some born-digital journals are beginning to experiment with open peer review, the examples we observed were still in early stages.
- Many digital publications are directed at small, niche audiences. There appears to be a very long tail in the field of digital scholarly resources with many tightly-focused publications directed at narrow audiences and capable of running on relatively small budgets.
- Some of the resources with greatest impact are those that have been around a long while. Given the importance of longevity in establishing scholarly reputation, the necessity of building an audience to attract high-quality content,

and the time it takes to fine-tune a digital resource, even excellent new digital publications may need years to establish their place in their scholarly community.

- Innovations relating to multimedia content and Web 2.0 functionality appear in some cases to blur the lines between resource types. We observed “video articles,” peer-reviewed reader commentary, and medieval illuminated texts coded as data – all evidence of the creative format mash-ups that challenge us to re-think the definitions of traditional content categories.
- Projects of all sizes are still seeking paths to sustainability. For open access sites – the vast majority of the resources studied here – the challenges can be great, since subscription fees are not an option. Nearly all of the publications that emerged in our survey are experimenting to find economic models that will support their work.

This report indicates several ways that university librarians can play a central role in sharing information about these digital resources with the campus community, and in guiding new projects toward success. In addition, the field team model has provided a path for enriching future interactions between faculty and librarians, one which ARL continues to develop.