



Coalition for Networked Information

## **Supporting Digital Humanities: Report of a CNI Executive Roundtable Held December 7 & 8, 2014 Published May 2016**

### **Background and Synthesis**

An increasing number of institutions are developing strategies to broadly address the needs of digital scholarship in the humanities. Evidence of this growing interest can be seen in the overwhelming response to a Call for Participation in a CNI Executive Roundtable on *Supporting Digital Humanities*, held in conjunction with CNI Fall Membership Meeting in Washington, DC. One-quarter of CNI's member institutions requested a seat at the table, and even though we held two separate sessions of the Roundtable on sequential days, we were only able to accommodate slightly more than half of those who wished to attend. We also held an open breakout session during the main meeting, offering a quick turnaround summary of the Roundtables.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of the Roundtable was on how to institutionalize support for digital scholarship in the humanities. For many institutions, support of digital humanities began with one-time support for a project that received major grant funding and generally ran into sustainability problems when the grant funding ended. Supporting digital humanities at scale, programmatically, is a different type of challenge than supplying customized support to a handful of well-financed projects. Applying digital methodologies in research should be an option for every faculty member in every discipline, but how do institutions support that? In many of the institutions represented at the roundtables, the library had assumed some key responsibilities for such support, particularly in the humanities. (In some sciences, where much of the research is underwritten by grants, faculty have been more self-supporting, with institutional engagement coming more in dealing with the consequences of using digital methodologies, such as data curation.)

Many types of higher education institutions were represented at the roundtables, and participants included library leaders, chief information officers, deans of arts and sciences, faculty actively engaged in digital humanities projects, and digital

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<sup>1</sup> An edited transcript of the session at the December 2014 CNI membership meeting in which Clifford Lynch reviewed the key outcomes of the Roundtables and provided additional thoughts during a question and answer session is available on the CNI website at <https://www.cni.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Digital-Humanities-F14-PB-Transcript.pdf>.

scholarship center staff. Institutions are supporting digital humanities in a variety of ways and it became clear that there was not a great deal of consensus across institutions about what types of support were needed or how to structure it, although that support was frequently centered in the library. In some institutions, an academic administrator would decide to put funding into support of digital humanities and then found that there was a certain amount of infighting about how the money should be spent.

A question posed by CNI Executive Director Clifford Lynch to the groups was: *why is this so hard?* A key source of the problem was that high level academic administrators who don't have humanities backgrounds often did not immediately understand that few humanities faculty receive grants from outside sources to support their work; what grants they receive are frequently modest, and focused on covering faculty release time, summer salary and travel—indeed, many humanities grants don't include institutional overhead funding. Therefore, some of the infrastructure and technology support that scientists and some social scientists routinely receive (directly and indirectly) through their grant funds was not available for most humanities faculty. It is clear that there is a structural issue here, and that there is a need for sustained institutional funding for digital humanities in order for those projects to succeed. Making the case for that support can be difficult, although one avenue is for humanists to promote the public engagement aspects of many of their projects, which may align with their institution's mission priorities, especially in state universities. However, university administrators may view that as a relatively niche win compared to the major funds that science grants can bring into the university and the high visibility that marquee scientific, medical and engineering breakthroughs offer.

Much of the discussion at the roundtables centered on what is meant by "support" in the participants' institutions. It is generally accepted that digital humanities work is typically done in teams, unlike the most-commonly solo work of traditional humanists. The teams may involve scholars from other institutions, as well as a variety of information professionals, graduate and undergraduate students, and post-docs who can assist with selection and use of tools, work on project management, advise on costs, and assist with dissemination and preservation. Some of the approaches discussed included a tiered support model, where there are basic services such as training and limited consultation for any humanities scholars and then a substantial investment in support for a small number of selected projects. Others frame their model as a core support organization through the mainstream information technology (IT) and library services coupled with a center or lab where projects are allowed to grow and get much more intensive support. There was a general sense that many humanities faculty who are delving into digital projects don't necessarily want to obtain high-level technical skills themselves but want to better understand what's possible and then have access to technical staff who can be part of a team working with them. Many scholars also seem interested in being part of a community and digital scholarship centers seem to have a very useful role in this regard. Where institutions have centers or labs, they also seem to play an important role in assisting faculty in connecting their teaching and learning work

with their research projects, developing assignments for students and in some cases directly involving students in the project's work.

Note that the new skills faculty need to develop and/or gain access to are not limited to expertise with digital technologies; as work shifts to teams, and grant support becomes more of a factor, project and team management, grant-writing and grant administration expertise also becomes important.

Surprisingly, there was little call from the humanists present for most kinds of infrastructure services. While The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and others who have invested heavily in things like manuscript readers and annotators that will allow scholars and students to navigate a multi-layer document with images, transcription and translation along with layers of annotations and links, have made efforts in recent years to reduce and converge the variety of software that are fundamentally providing the same functionality, this has been driven largely by funders concerned with interoperability, data sharing, and return on investment. There were no strong voices from participants urging that we develop a core set of common platforms and tools and get them deployed. Both roundtables touched on the late, largely unsuccessful, Project Bamboo briefly (see background at <http://llc.oxfordjournals.org/content/29/3/326>) and there was an interesting tension about how much resource should be committed to the common infrastructure and how much should be invested instead in access to databases and reference collections along with a few tools around them.

There is a complicated set of issues around the dissemination or publication of digital scholarship, and libraries are often natural partners to work with faculty on these. In the print world, there are clear hand-offs throughout the creation and publication cycles, from author to editor and publisher; preservation is essentially implicit in physical publication as research libraries acquire the books. There is a murkier relationship in dissemination of digital work, especially if the product goes beyond a predominantly static text plus images output into multimedia, visualization, and interactive modes. There seems to be some potentially quite strong synergy emerging between digital humanities scholars and the activities driven in part by library-based publishing. These library or joint library-press experiments in publishing and disseminating the outcomes of digital humanities research are important developments. Ideally there would be more inter-institutional collaboration on both new publishing models and systems, although there is real progress taking place.

The legitimacy of digital humanities scholarship is a serious and ongoing issue in the conservative world of promotion and tenure review and is considered a major impediment to innovation; in most humanities fields, publication of a print monograph (most commonly single-authored) is considered the "gold standard" for advancement in one's academic career. In addition, many humanists are justifiably concerned about the long-term viability of their projects in the digital environment, and ideally libraries can play a role in the stewardship of these new types of products. And it's unclear how participation in big, collaborative multi-institutional projects will be valued in tenure and promotion.

Another topic that was briefly addressed was the difficulty of managing cross-institutional projects, with one of the issues being identity management. When a cross-institutional team is building a digital humanities resource, they typically cobble together some type of local password system that requires people to register with a service. The system is not integrated with evolving campus or national identity management and authorization infrastructures, and often the faculty developing their own system do not know how to interface with the institutional IT units who could assist them in using standard systems. At the same time, when digital humanities projects do integrate this kind of common infrastructure, it creates new and unfamiliar support and change management challenges for the IT organization.

While these roundtables focused on support of digital humanities, it is important to point out that many digital scholarship centers that are located in libraries support a wider range of disciplines; more detail on those centers is available in a CNI report ([http://www.cni.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/CNI-Digital-Schol.-Centers-report-2014.web\\_.pdf](http://www.cni.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/CNI-Digital-Schol.-Centers-report-2014.web_.pdf)).

## **Institutional Perspectives**

Some key perspectives from participants included:

- At least half of the institutions represented that had active programs supporting digital scholarship noted that those programs supported both social sciences and humanities; the sciences were less mentioned. Some stated that there were many common tools and methodologies across the humanities and social science work. One participant remarked that many humanists, both using traditional and digital modes of inquiry, consider the library as their lab.
- There's a lot of variation in scale: some of the participating institutions are working with a handful of projects while one university stated that its digital scholarship center currently has 80 projects on the docket.
- A number of participants reflected on why the library was seen by campus constituents as a good locale for the support of digital scholarship. One participant noted that the library is seen as "Switzerland," a neutral party among competing departmental interests. Another participant stated that the library is an important site for anchoring nascent initiatives and is a site of practice and action, in both research and pedagogy.
- Some of the frequently mentioned ways that libraries support digital humanities included infrastructure support, tools and specialized software, data storage, and space (physical and virtual) for experimentation. Some of the services mentioned included project design and scoping, as well as providing expertise in such areas as selection of technologies, licensing, dissemination, and preservation. Some institutions

were offering many of these services in an uncoordinated, decentralized fashion and were considering how to develop a more cohesive program.

- A small number of institutions represented stated that libraries are now both genuine partners and in some cases drivers for digital humanities research; they are no longer silent supporters. Some noted that their digital scholarship center was in itself a research group in the library, not a support service.
- Quite a few of the institutions represented employ current graduate students and/or post-docs in their digital scholarship centers; many of the latter are Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) Fellows. In addition, some centers believe that having staff with joint appointments in the library and in an academic department are a key for success.
- Several university library directors stated that they had redefined a number of open positions to recruit individuals who have the skills needed to support digital scholarship.
- Providing physical space for faculty and graduate students working on digital humanities projects, providing a place for project incubation, and a place for undergraduates to work, were all mentioned as important aspects of overall support for digital humanities.
- Some libraries support a publishing platform and program that is a venue for dissemination of digital humanities projects. In other cases, the institutional repository is the platform used to provide access to and curate the outputs of the projects. Note also several libraries offering services to faculty using platforms like Omeka that do not have a publishing heritage. While these platforms may be hosted at campus IT, the service ownership is with the library and the library functions as the face of the services seen by the faculty.
- Several participants who are actively building digital humanities projects noted the need for expertise to help them make their projects accessible; a number of librarians stated that they provide that type of support.
- Some faculty participants mentioned that they have considerable concerns about their peers' attitudes towards digital scholarship when considered in promotion and tenure reviews. One noted that some important traditional scholars on his campus publicly state that they believe digital scholarship is a waste of time. On a couple of the campuses represented, however, academic administrators have made a concerted effort to hire a cohort of faculty with digital humanities research interests when they have open positions, signaling some change in attitude. Some scholarly societies, such as the Modern Language Association, are providing guidance on consideration of digital products in promotion and tenure

review (<https://www.mla.org/About-Us/Governance/Committees/Committee-Listings/Professional-Issues/Committee-on-Information-Technology/Guidelines-for-Evaluating-Work-in-Digital-Humanities-and-Digital-Media>).

- Representatives from universities in New York City and the Boston area noted their participation in city-wide digital humanities groups, bringing together faculty and information professionals from a range of universities to promote collaborations, co-sponsor events, discuss mutual concerns and build a community.
- Interestingly, some participants commented about the very limited uptake in the humanities of systems like VIVO, perhaps due to concerns that humanists will appear less productive than colleagues in the sciences; and limited relevance of co-authorship and collaboration networks in the humanities. Humanists are also currently not well supported by ORCID bibliography claiming.
- Some of the participants from Canadian universities reported that they have more consortial activities supporting infrastructure and tool development than seems to be the case in the US. In addition, one of their national agencies, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, provides significant support for a number of digital humanities initiatives based in universities and is considered a mark of quality.
- Several institutions reported interesting collaborations involving digital technologies, humanities and performing arts. We should not overlook the arts in terms of digital support strategies.
- A number of institutions underscored the role of the library in acquiring and collecting evidence, or arranging access to such evidence, as a critical role in supporting digital humanities. It's about content as well as tools. Researchers also seek assistance with rights issues related to content.
- Several institutions reminded us that adjunct (non-tenure track) faculty in the humanities are becoming ever more numerous at their institutions, and that these offer additional support challenges.

## Concluding Thoughts

Developing an institutional perspective on the support of digital humanities requires considering the life cycle of these projects and programs. The publication and preservation of the more complex products of digital humanities research, those involving such components as interactivity, visualization, and multi-media, for example, is a genuine challenge for both scholars and institutions. Some academic libraries are putting resources into working with

faculty on these issues, but more will be needed to ensure the long-term survivability of many of these projects. In a somewhat parallel situation, we need good solutions for targeted and easy-to-use tools that can be employed in a diverse set of digital humanities projects. In all of these arenas—publishing, preservation and tool development—coordinated efforts by a group of institutions would seem to be the most efficient and cost-effective approach.

Many of the digital humanities projects and digital scholarship centers represented at the roundtables had a number of projects that incorporated teaching and learning elements along with the research components of the project. The learning activities, particularly those involving undergraduates, can be pathways to greater student engagement with humanities disciplines. For example, at one institution, an English professor worked with the special collections librarian in a course on digital humanities; the students digitized materials, extracted and manipulated text, created visualizations and then developed a website to engage the broader public in their work.

At the roundtables, there was a very strong sense among many participants that librarians and libraries, along with IT professionals, are going to play a key role in sorting out broad support for digital humanities. This may entail increasing reliance on professionals in the library who have joint appointments in humanities departments and libraries and the recruitment of post-docs in programs such as the one offered by CLIR. However, one participant suggested that relying on short-term employees such as post-docs is not the way to build relationships when some projects may take many years to come to fruition. These developments may signal a shift in the library's relationship to the academic program. One participant commented that he wants to see the library as the trusted partner on campus for support of this work.

CNI continues to actively pursue dissemination of information on models and trends in supporting digital scholarship. At the spring CNI 2015 membership meeting, we hosted a small meeting to discuss the varieties of centers, labs, and institutes that support digital scholarship, where we attempted to better define some of the characteristics that distinguish various types of programs. In spring 2016 we will co-host, in collaboration with the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), a workshop that will assist institutions that are at early planning stages of developing digital scholarship centers or labs.

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**CNI Executive Roundtables**, held at CNI's semi-annual membership meetings, bring together a group of campus partners, usually senior library and information technology leaders, to discuss a key digital information topic and its strategic implications. The roundtables build on the theme of collaboration that is at the foundation of the Coalition; they serve as a forum for frank, unattributed intra and inter-institutional dialogue on digital information issues and their organizational and strategic implications. In addition, CNI uses roundtable discussions to inform our ongoing program planning process.

**The Coalition for Networked Information (CNI)** is a joint program of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and EDUCAUSE that promotes the use of information technology to advance scholarship and education. Some 230 institutions representing higher education, publishing, information technology, scholarly and professional organizations, foundations, and libraries and library organizations, make up CNI's members. Learn more at [www.cni.org](http://www.cni.org).