The role of libraries in Digital Humanities
(El papel de las bibliotecas en las humanidades digitales)

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Abstract:

The ongoing changes in the digital information landscape and user needs have prompted libraries to keep permanently up to date in order to maintain their relevance in this dynamic networked environment. An aspect that has not been thoroughly studied is the relationship and cooperation between digital humanities (DH) and libraries. This paper provides a critical review of the main challenges faced by developers of DH resources (organizational context, documentation, completion and sustainability, preservation, evaluation, recognition, use and dissemination) and analyzes the the ways in which libraries can contribute towards solving them. A broad outline is proposed regarding opportunities and challenges for collaboration, which can benefit DH, as well as proving libraries with an important role in the custody, handling and delivery of digital resources, thus maintaing their relevance and importance in the academic world.

Key words: digital humanities, digital libraries, digital resources

The role of libraries in Digital Humanities

Introduction

The digital environment poses a series of new challenges and opportunities that have been widely discussed over the last decades. The arrival of the Web, the extensive use of search engines to find information, the integration of library-type services into academic journal

publishing platforms, among others, compete with libraries to become the starting point for users in their search for information. These new search patterns are found both among researchers and students, and thus, traditional academic libraries are struggling to remain relevant. However, these new circumstances have also created novel needs in the handling of information. Libraries currently face new and interesting opportunities for collaboration where their experience and knowledge are indispensable. For instance, libraries have played a key role in the open access movement by creating institutional repositories and deposit services for researchers. Nowadays, with the ongoing discussion on the importance of handling and publishing scientific data, libraries have reinvented themselves as curators and access providers to data bases (Lynch 2008). Ciberinfraestructure iniciatives (e-science) also put libraries in a key position for their development (O'Brian 2010). Nevertheless, these examples focus mainly on academic journals as well as on the curatorial work of scientific databases. The academic article is a predominant means of communication in the sciences but not necessarily in the humanities. Additionally the production of digital resources varies among disciplines. The aim of this article is to analyze the role university libraries can play regarding research and education of the humanities within the digital environment.

Digital Humanities

Currently a large number of digital resources are being developed for scholars in the humanities. The creation, dissemination and use of electronic resources by researchers in the humanities, as well as the digital tools for their analysis are becoming increasingly important topics. Digital Humanities (DH) is a term that describes the interdisciplinary field that studies the impact and the relationships of computer technologies in the work of researchers in the humanities (Borgman 2009; Friedlander 2009; Presner 2009).

University libraries have a wide experience in digitalization projects and digital resources (Terras 2010). However, it is increasingly common that scholars in the humanities produce digital resources as a result of their research in formats such as data bases, on-line bibliographies, digital images collections, digital editions, manuscript transcriptions, maps, websites and blogs to cite a few examples (Brown 2009, Svensson 2010). However, few studies have been carried out on what is done with these resources and their impact in the humanities. There is also limited knowledge about who develops these resources, their motivations and the impact these have on humanities research and teaching work. Due to the fact that resources are created outside the formal publishing or library context, issues such as classification, collection development, reader notification, rights management, dissemination, long term maintenance and preservation are frequently overlooked.

These digital resources are frequently the result of research and often require an important financial investment (Warwick 2008; Terras 2010). Additionally, they are of interest for other researches in the area. Nonetheless, although most resources are available, it is difficult for potential online readers to find them (Dunning 2006; Pappa et al. 2006). University libraries can play an important role in organizing, classifying, providing access and preserving these resources.

Methodology

This research was carried out as part of the research project "Creation, dissemination and primary resources use in the humanities" at the Institute for Bibliographic Studies (Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México [UNAM]). Its objective is to assess digital humanities projects using the UNAM as a case study. From the preliminary results of this research, key points for digital humanities projects were identified. These key points were in turn analyzed to identify in which ways libraries could function as instrumental collaborators.

Digital humanities key points were established with an extensive literature review and two research workshops carried out at the UNAM. Seven key points were identified and analysed. Results of this part of the research are discussed in detail in Galina and Priani (2011). Out of those points, six relevant issues for libraries are higlighted:

- Organizational context
- Documentation
- Completion and sustainability
- Preservation
- Evaluation and recognition
- Use and dissemination

Discussion

These six points are described as follows and analysed in relationship to libraries and suggestions are made for possible areas of collaboration.

Organizational Context: most digital humanities projects reported that although university authorities acknowledge the importance of registering and managing digital resources, institutional support is not backed by up with appropriate policies and structures to enable this. Therefore, the majority of projects are carried out by individuals and a common feeling among developers is one of isolation. Libraries could be of great help providing developers of resources in DH with practices and guidelines, as well as helping with registration and management. In this sense, libraries could become a reference point and support for developers.

Documentation: most digital humanities projects either do not have documentation or do not make it readily available[1]. This is an important issue for evaluation, authentication and long term relevance of the resource. Libraries can collaborate not only by making the resource available but also managing the accompanying technical and procedural documentation. Libraries have ample experience in managing archives and collections and therefore they could assist developers in organizing and cataloging accompanying project documentation. This helps maintain a project's relevance, regardless of the original developer.

Completion and sustainability: a recurring issue is long-term maintenance of projects, as not every project has a fixed termination date (Brown et al. 2009, Kretzschmar 2009). In many cases digital reosurces developers have not considered or been able to solve long-term hosting of their project. The majority of hosting issues are resolved on a personal basis and not institutionally. A critical issue is the permanence of these resources once the principal developer focuses on new projects or topics. Libraries have proven experience with the selection, clearing and management of information resources and could collaborate together with server managers for the long term management of DH projects. Additionally, the long term stewadship of a resource should not be one persons responsibility. Libraries are fundamental in the structure of universities, and they can provide the stability and institutional status required for the long term sustainability of DH resources.

Preservation: as in other areas the issue of digital preservation is acknowledged but still not solved. In most cases digital humanties developers do not have the tools or the knowledge to address the preservation of the resources that they produce. Collaboration with libraries could be key. Preservation of digital resources is easier if taken into consideration at an early stage of design and elaboration. Libraries could work jointly with developers to ensure that the digital resource is optimized for preservation through the use of standards, preservation meta data and best practices, among others. Furthermore, most DH resources are usually complex, dynamic and innovative, posing important challenges for libraries (Scholosser 2010) as well as an interesting research area for library and information sciences.

Assesment and recognition: a recurring issue is a discrepancy between financial support from authorities and the scarce value or recognition attached to projects by evaluation commitees. The research and intellectual endeavour of producing these resources is not valued in the same way as formal published output. The reason for this is partly due to the lack of indicators available for evaluation committees to assess these new forms of academic research, communication and publishing. Libraries have experience in evaluating and cataloging resources. Additionally their collaboration in the elaboration of typologies and classification of these

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[1] One notable exception is linguistics (see Warwick 2009)

types of resources could greatly contribute to the production of more reliable indicators for evaluation. Moreover, if DH resources form part of the library collections this provides them with a certain institutional status that indicates a degree of quality and confidence for the users.

Use and dissemination: A recurrent issue for DH projects is that little information is available about who is using the resources and what for. Simply because a resource is online does not guarantee that interested users will discover it. In this way, libraries can play an essential role by integrating digital resources into their catalogs providing users with unique, original and useful resources which are not necessarily easily available through other means. This gives libraries a unique value, and provides users with an added value service that is not available elsewhere, integrating both formal and informal publication types. Furthermore, most digital libraries employ usage indicators which is useful for both the developers and evaluators in order to rate the impact of DH resources.

Conclusions

There is a clear need to assist scholars in the humanities in creating, hosting, disseminating and preserving their digital humanities resources. Nowadays there is limited support and lack of policies and established mechanisms for doing this. Responsibility for the custody of these resources is not clearly assigned. Libraries could play a key role in this task with their support and experience in cataloging, organizing, conservating and providing information services for users. This is also an opportunity for libraries to develop new services and relationships with users increasing their relevance in today's world. As libraries enter cyberinfrastructure and other computer and information initiatives, it is important to incorporate and support the particular information needs of the humanities.

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