

Chapter 5

Connecting and Enabling the Humanities: e-Research in the Border Zone

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ABSTRACT

E-Research is well-established in science and technology fields but is at an earlier stage of development in the humanities. Investments in technology infrastructure worldwide, however, are starting to pay dividends, and a cultural change is occurring, enabling closer collaborations between researchers in a sector that has traditionally emphasized individual research activities. This chapter discusses ways in which the humanities are utilizing digital methods, including: creating and enhancing online collections; building knowledge communities around projects, disciplines, and data; and communicating research results in widely accessible formats. E-Research has brought with it new attitudes, behaviors, and expectations. Topics include the growing opportunities for collaborative and cross-disciplinary approaches, building the information commons, and the need for long-term strategic investment in research infrastructure.

INTRODUCTION

In today's era of ubiquitous computing and global online connectivity, e-research is enriching research across a growing range of academic disciplines. Its reach is extending beyond the

science and technology fields where it originated, and is now "penetrating the social sciences and humanities, [though] sometimes with differences in accent and label" (Jankowski, 2009). This chapter discusses some of the ways in which humanities researchers are embracing new digital resources, formats and modes of collaborating in order to further the traditional goals of humani-

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ties research, “to better understand ourselves, our history, and our cultural heritage” (Cole, 2007).

Humanities researchers constitute a very large and diverse community whose intellectual contribution is vitally important to social, cultural, and economic wellbeing. Their research encompasses “the study of society, identity, economy, business, governance, history, culture and creativity,” a vast field that “links universities, government agencies, collecting institutions and creative industries with policy development and with communities” (Strategic Roadmap, 2011, p. 45). The field typically includes disciplines such as archaeology, arts, classical studies, cultural and communication studies, English, history, languages, linguistics, literature, philosophy and religion. The use of digital tools, services and methodologies is impacting on how records of human culture and history are created, stored, interpreted and accessed, and humanities research practices are changing, but it is a gradual process. E-Research in the humanities includes activities such as: creating and enhancing online collections; building knowledge communities around projects, disciplines and data; and communicating research results in widely accessible formats.

Topics covered in this chapter include the growing opportunities for collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches, building the information commons for public benefit, and the growing need for strategic investment in research infrastructure to support the humanities. Humanities e-research initiatives in Australia are highlighted as a specific example that is aligned with and reinforces recent international policy directions.

BACKGROUND

Extending e-Research to the Humanities

Computers have been used in humanities research for more than 50 years, and yet the benefits of

digital methods, especially those that have evolved over the past two decades, have only recently begun to be widely understood in the academic community. This is in spite of the fact that in some circles, there was a very early awareness of the value of computing in the humanities¹. The following statement, from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) in 1966, remains relevant today: “*Of course* computers should be used by scholars in the humanities, just as microscopes should be used by scientists... [t]he facts and patterns that they—and often they alone—can reveal should be viewed not as the definitive answers to the questions that humanists have been asking, but rather as the occasion for a whole range of new and more penetrating and more exciting questions” (Blitzer, 1966). Forty years on, in 2006, the ACLS report, *Our Cultural Commonwealth*, was a call to action for the humanities sector. It argued that a better coordinated approach to managing and building the online information commons was an urgent priority and a responsibility to be taken seriously. The report notes that “with many new works [of scholarship] accessible and understood only through digital media,” purpose-designed solutions must be developed for the humanities sector; the “creation, curation, and preservation of information” requires advanced systems, but these cannot simply be borrowed from the sciences (Our Cultural Commonwealth, 2006, p. i). Applying the term ‘cyberinfrastructure’ to the humanities (a term given currency through a 2003 report of the National Science Foundation), the report recommended major investment in infrastructure funding on a national and international scale so that digital scholarship in this sector could become “cumulative, collaborative, and synergistic” (Our Cultural Commonwealth, 2006, p. i). Similar concerns were noted in the European context (ESFRI, 2008b, p. 16).

To date, digital technologies have more naturally supported existing methodologies and patterns of work in the sciences than they have in the humanities. However, we are now at a critical

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