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Acquiring Minds Want To Know: Digital Scholarship - A New Scholarly Enterprise

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No Abstract

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Acquiring Minds Want to Know
Joyce L. Ogburn

Digital Scholarship: A New Scholarly Enterprise

A new form of scholarship has emerged in recent years that can be called “digital scholarship.” I have seen it defined as online publishing or digitized material presented online, or, in other words, scholarship that appears in a digital form. However, a more compelling definition treats it as scholarship that depends entirely on being digital, i.e., it is created, carried out, and disseminated entirely digitally. In essence, it is not possible without digital technology.

This is an important distinction. Many objects can be converted to a digital format, and as desirable as that is, most of them can fulfill their functions quite well without being digital. Scholarship that is dependent on being digital is a new development. It is often highly visual and visually oriented. It often contains text but may also be a study of text. It may combine many different data types, systems and software. It may include a special interface. Often digital scholarship takes the form of stand alone projects that are not integrated with other digital works. However, there may be nothing that prevents this from happening, in fact, by being digital, the possibilities for collaboration, sharing or repurposing are enormous.

Digital scholarship has evolved as scholars began to realize the potential of digital technology to transform their work, in the areas of both research and teaching. The results of digital scholarship are displayed and disseminated digitally, often through a specially developed web site. The results may never be published in a peer reviewed journal or in a scholarly monograph. Information about or deriving from the project, however, may be published. This change in publishing and dissemination of results is part of what makes digital scholarship so different from digitized scholarship.

Many good examples have come out of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, a center at the University of Virginia that is housed in the library. Its goal is “to explore and expand the potential of information technology as a tool for humanities research. To that end, we provide our Fellows with consulting, technical support, applications programming, and networked publishing facilities. We also cultivate partnerships and participate in humanities computing initiatives with libraries, publishers, information technology companies, scholarly organizations, and others interested in the intersection of computers and cultural heritage.”

[\(http://www.iath.virginia.edu/\)](http://www.iath.virginia.edu/)

One of their more famous projects is that of Edward L. Ayres, *The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War*. This ambitious work captures the experience of two different communities, one Northern and one Southern, throughout the Civil War. It was conceived as a hypermedia archive of newspapers, letters, diaries, photographs, maps, church records, population census, agricultural census, and military records. The site says that “Students can explore every dimension of the conflict and write their own histories, reconstructing the life stories of women, African Americans, farmers, politicians, soldiers, and families. The project is intended for secondary schools, community colleges, libraries, and universities.” (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/choosepart.html#story>)

The Valley of the Shadow combines new and reformatted sources to create a new work of scholarship. It gains part of its appeal and strength by melding teaching and research – an excellent example of how digital forms of scholarship can achieve the goals of integration and multi-purposing of material.

Another site that promotes many innovative projects is the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative. ECAI focuses on global mapping, imagery, and texts to provide access to “research based on digital technology which presents complex combinations of data from multiple disciplines visually and immediately.” (<http://www.ecai.org/>) Based at UC-Berkeley and under the Dean of International and Area Studies, ECAI often deals with materials from or about other countries or regions of the world, but not exclusively. In fact, the Valley of the Shadow has a project component with ECAI. ECAI supports research into new technologies and infrastructures, develops standards, and sponsors conferences. It also acts as a collective where participants can list information and provide links to their projects. Some are ECAI developed projects and are housed at the ECAI site. Additionally ECAI collaborates with the California Digital Library’s eScholarship program, another locus of new scholarship (<http://www.escholarship.cdlib.org/>).

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has been a strong supporter of digital scholarship, particularly that which is created in the humanities and social sciences. Don Waters, Program Officer for Scholarly Communication, has often spoken about the projects that they have sponsored. Their scholarly communication program supports digital scholarship because of the impact it may have on the current system of conducting and communicating research.

Unfortunately scholarship of this nature is still so new that often it goes unrecognized and unrewarded in the promotion and tenure process. The faculty members who grew up with computers and are most likely to experiment with and engage in this new form of scholarship are discouraged from exploring and developing this path. ECAI

tackles this dilemma head on. On their web site they state, “We are entering into a dialogue with university administrators to ensure that ECAI publications are just as acceptable as books and articles to the people who make hiring and tenure decisions. In this way, we hope to create a climate that allows young scholars to publish in the medium that is most meaningful and intellectually exciting to them.” Let us hope that the recognition afforded by awards such as those made by the Mellon Foundation or by being part of ECAI will begin to change the system and will allow digital scholarship to flourish.

Libraries are becoming more supportive of and engaged with scholars in the creation of digital research and dissemination of the results for several reasons. For one, librarians often have useful skills to apply, such as the creation of metadata schemes. For another, librarians have become increasingly involved in the research of faculty and the teaching of information literacy to their students. Librarians also have a strong and vested interest in fostering movements that have the potential to change the current system of scholarly communication. Libraries also have some of the equipment and space necessary to set up these projects, having carved out these resources for digital reformatting of library collections. Last but not least, librarians are in the business of preserving scholarship, and the best way to do that is to be involved at every stage of digital scholarship.

The current drive by libraries to create institutional repositories has not yet grappled with the complexity of true digital scholarship. Institutional repositories more often than not are starting with trying to capture and preserve more text based and simple forms of digital works. Digital scholarship will require an exceptional level of commitment and risk for libraries over time. Will our efforts be worth it? The scholars will surely let us know.

Tony’s article on GIS in latest issue of ATG

Do a web site with UW Scholcom page and e-publishing?