

Making Sense of Digital Humanities at the Library

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Introduction

Digitisation of information and methods has brought new possibilities and challenges into all aspects of society and a direction of continued advances is readily apparent in strategic initiatives all the way from European and national funding to directives at individual academic institutions in Sweden. Resources that used to be available only in physical archives are becoming more freely accessible on the internet, far beyond the walls of the library, and in formats that can be read and interpreted by apps and algorithms.

Nine years ago, digital humanities (DH) was described as “the next big thing” and the concept has later been compared to an allegory of the future of the humanities (Liu, 2012). Today library employees encounter the term in their interactions with education and research alike. The process of understanding and framing the challenges and possibilities that DH has brought into the library has been a topic in parallel initiatives at Linköping University Library and at Uppsala University Library.

Questions

The purpose of this paper is to draw on the experience of academic libraries to frame the challenges and possibilities of supporting DH in a Nordic context. The paper aims to answer to the following questions from a Nordic academic library perspective:

- How do we understand to the notion of DH in the library?
- How do we (re)organise to support researchers and students in DH?

Background

Burdick (2012) writes that DH has encouraged new ways of conducting research in the humanities and that a possible effect is that traditional boundaries start to blur as collaborations between disciplines form. And the exploding wealth of computers, mobile devices and new communication channels enables global knowledge creation and sharing (Nyberg et al, 2012). As a consequence, the intersection of digital methods, technology and humanities can expand and enhance humanities research with increased accessibility both within and beyond the academic context (Burdick, 2012). Drucker et.al. (2013) and Raffaghelli et.al. (2013) describes DH as a mix of humanities and digital technology. Svensson (2010) define a Centre for Digital Humanities as the place or event where new knowledge is created in the humanities, with digital methods, media and technology. The idea of a place for DH has since been realised in Swedish universities e.g. in Umeå (Humlab) and Lund (Humanities Lab), and the idea of a DH lab is a recognised idea of how DH can be executed.

Within the library context, the characteristics of the sources and data formats that researchers in the humanities are working with are changing and it is possible to study significantly larger collections of pictures and texts than before (Liu, 2012). The fact that DH is a complex notion and that the conditions are quickly changing with new technology means that libraries have to develop readiness to meet the needs of today as well as those of tomorrow (Sula, 2013).

Svensson (2010) describes the library as a form of laboratory for humanities research and that knowledge in building collections, information science and IT make libraries a natural and important infrastructure for DH. Zhang et al (2015) studied how information experts can contribute in DH projects and underline the importance of expertise in storage and access, publishing, search, training and innovation. Green (2014) conducted case studies involving five libraries in the USA and show that a close collaboration with the library is necessary to optimise the research process. Wong (2016) stresses the strength in gathering experts and specialists from different fields as a part of bringing DH to its full potential.

Approach

This paper stems from the experience of practitioners who have been involved in efforts to organise support for DH at two academic libraries in Sweden. The discussion and conclusions are supported by the results of

- conducting lightly structured interviews, semi-structured observations and document analysis at libraries in the Sweden, Denmark, and the USA
- surveying how libraries in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland describe their work related to DH
- designing and evaluating DH-related activities for students and researchers at Uppsala University Library

The results are interpreted with a life-cycle perspective on research and education and focus on organisation, actors, activities, services, tools and spaces.

Findings

We confirm that Sula's (2013) description of DH as a complex notion is valid in the Nordic academic library context as the results show that different people attribute the term with different meanings. There were libraries labelling themselves as not actively supporting DH, while at the same time describing activities that could just as well indicate that they are indeed active. We suggest that it may be useful for libraries to focus on emerging needs in relation to digital sources and methods, interdisciplinary research support, and new media for scholarly communications.

The result also showed that the surveyed Nordic academic libraries were at an early stage of organising work to support DH and predominantly positioned their activities as collaborations with researchers or participation in networks. Contrasting with the results from academic libraries where DH practices are already well established, we suggest that Nordic libraries can organise to support DH by

- Positioning staff/services close to active research and education with elements of DH
- Framing DH activities in the context of today's goals and responsibilities

- Engaging staff with technical skills, subject expertise and a learning mindset (Lewis et al, 2015) in DH projects, labs and events
- Creating digital and physical spaces to support DH tools and practices
- Adopting and sharing practices and expertise with other libraries and academic infrastructures

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