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The Function of Digital Humanities Centers at the Present Time

NEIL FRAISTAT

The emergence of the digital humanities as a coherent field was accompanied by and partially a result of the evolution of the Humanities Computing Center as an institution, as could be found in such exemplary early centers in the United States as Princeton and Rutgers' Center for Electronic Texts in the Humanities (1991), the University of Virginia's Institute of Advanced Technology in the Humanities (1993), and Brown University's Scholarly Technology Group (1994). They and other earlier centers at such places as Oxford and King's College London became important laboratories for the application of information technology to the humanities; powerful advocates for the significance of such work; crucial focal points for the theorization of the digital humanities as a field; local nodes of cyberinfrastructure; and influential models for the ever-increasing number of other digital humanities centers that have appeared on the scene, including the Maryland Institute for Technology and the Humanities (1999), the Stanford Humanities Lab (2000), and the University of Nebraska's Center for Digital Research in the Humanities (2005).

Through their own in-house research, digital humanities centers have produced important new digital resources and tools that benefit the humanities community as a whole. Equally important, digital humanities centers are key sites for bridging the daunting gap between new technology and humanities scholars, serving as the crosswalks between cyberinfrastructure and users, where scholars learn how to introduce into their research computational methods, encoding practices, and tools and where users of digital resources can be transformed into producers. Centers not only model the kind of collaborative and interdisciplinary work that will increasingly come to define humanities scholarship; they also enable graduate students and faculty to learn from each other while working on projects of common intellectual interest. The lectures, symposia, and workshops hosted by centers benefit those at other institutions without centers themselves but who are able to attend in person or virtually. Centers, in short, can be invaluable community resources.

But individual centers are also at risk of being silos, overly focused on their home institutions. They rarely collaborate with other centers, with whom they compete for funding and prestige, and when working in isolation they are unable to address the larger problems of the field. Especially on campuses where there is an existing "traditional" humanities center, digital humanities centers even run the risk of being silos on their own campuses if they don't work actively at collaboration. Tensions on campus can also exist when a center that aspires to be treated as a research unit is treated by administrators as a service unit instead, and the perceived divisions between "research" centers and "service" centers, in turn, create professional hierarchies that can inhibit the formation of potentially fruitful collaborations among centers. Centers also siphon off grant funding from schools unable to afford a digital humanities center of their own and thus can make it harder for scholars at such places to participate in the larger projects. Are they crucial to the future of the field, or deleterious to it? Or to point the question more finely, in what ways and under what circumstances might digital humanities centers be seen as more crucial to the field than deleterious? What exactly is the function of the digital humanities center at the present time?

The potential value of digital humanities centers to individual scholars and to the field as a whole is stated poignantly by Mark Sample in a blog entry "On the Death of the Digital Humanities Center." In elegiac tones, Sample mourns, at first, proleptically for centers that will have come and gone and for centers that never will be but then also for all those in the field who are laboring now without the support of a digital humanities center:

> Most of us working in the digital humanities will never have the opportunity to collaborate with a dedicated center or institute. We'll never have the chance to work with programmers who speak the language of the humanities as well as Perl, Python, or PHP. We'll never be able to turn to colleagues who routinely navigate grant applications and budget deadlines, who are paid to know about the latest digital tools and trends—but who'd know about them and share their knowledge even if they weren't paid a dime. We'll never have an institutional advocate on campus who can speak with a single voice to administrators, to students, to donors, to publishers, to communities about the value of the digital humanities.

While Sample is concerned in this post about how digital humanities can further itself as a field without being dependent on centers, he recognizes that centers provide significant benefits to those beyond a particular center's own campus, and he himself teaches at George Mason University, home to one of the most highly regarded digital humanities centers in the world.

As Sample also recognizes, "there is no single model for the digital humanities center. Some focus on pedagogy. Others on research. Some build things. Others host things. Some do it all." To these variants, we might add that some are primarily

service units, some primarily research, some a mixture of both. Some centers focus explicitly on digital humanities; some engage the humanities but are organized around media studies, or code studies—disciplines that are increasingly converging with digital humanities. North American centers tend to arise from the bottom up, European and Asian centers from the top down. North American centers tend to focus exclusively on humanities and, sometimes, the interpretive social sciences. European and Asian centers are more likely to be dispersed through the disciplines, or to be organized as virtual rather than physically located centers. Such generalities, however, only get us so far.

At a 2009 meeting between directors of traditional humanities centers and directors of digital humanities centers that was sponsored by the Scholarly Communications Institute, the first question asked of the digital humanities center directors by our counterparts at humanities centers was, "What do you actually *do* at digital humanities centers? Literally, what goes on during a typical day?" We were a bit taken aback by this question, but a few of us responded with enough concrete particulars to achieve a grounded understanding between both groups. Similarly, I want first to provide a specific sense of the things a representative digital humanities center actually does before I address the general function of the digital humanities center as an institution. To that end, let's take a brief tour of the center that I direct, the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, or, as it is more commonly known, MITH. Of course, our tour will have to be simulated through words, much like such early text adventure games as *ADVENTURE* and *Zork,* which have become important objects of study at MITH.

MITH: The Center as Digital Humanities Adventure

Walk with me, then, through the front door of MITH. We'll turn right and walk past the office of Dave Lester, MITH's assistant director, who is in a meeting with our software architect Jim Smith, our R&D developer Travis Brown, and our project coordinator Seth Denbo. The group is discussing the design of Project Bamboo's Corpora Space,[1] through which humanities scholars will be able to use sophisticated digital tools across the boundaries of large, distributed content collections. This Mellon-funded project, in which MITH is working with a team of scholars and technologists at ten partner universities—including Oxford, Australian National University, Berkeley, Northwestern, Wisconsin, and Tufts—illustrates how centers provide the means for local campus research capacity to be networked internationally and to produce cyberinfrastructure for the common good.

Continuing our walk to the far end of MITH, we arrive at a small kitchenette where we can grab a cup of coffee and chat with Grant Dickie who works in a nearby cubicle. Grant developed the interface and technical infrastructure for the *Shakespeare Quartos Archive*,[2] an electronic environment for the scholarly study of all known pre-1641 quartos of Shakespeare's plays, living artifacts that tell the

story of how such plays as *Hamlet*, *King Lear,* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* first circulated in print. This project was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), and our project partners were the British Library, the Bodleian Library, and the Folger Shakespeare Library. As we approach Grant, we can see that he is intently working on TILE, the Text-Image Linking Environment, a new web-based, modular, collaborative image markup tool for both manual and semiautomated linking of encoded text and image of text to image annotation.[3] Funded by the NEH, TILE will be released to the digital humanities community as a set of componentized services and is a concrete example of how tools produced at digital humanities centers benefit the larger community, like such well known tools as Zotero and Omeka, which were produced by George Mason's Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media.

Taking our cups of coffee with us, we head back into the center aisle of MITH, where ten paces to our right we see a Microsoft Surface at which Alex Quinn, a MITH graduate research assistant from Computer Science and the Human Computer Interaction Lab, is working to develop interfaces to enhance museum visitors' interaction with two prize objects in the Smithsonian's Sackler and Freer Gallery of Art: a thirty-foot-long fourteenth-century Chinese scroll and a sixteenth-century Turkish manuscript, the creation of which was the subject of Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name is Red*. The first in MITH's new research initiative on emerging interfaces for museums and libraries, this project has been funded internally by seed grants from the University of Maryland's vice president for research and dean of the libraries and is an example of how digital humanities centers are increasingly engaging in a form of "public humanities" that benefits the general public through work done with institutions of cultural memory and performing arts.

As we proceed toward MITH's seminar room at the far end of the main aisle, we pass the workstation of Frank Hildy, a current MITH faculty fellow from the Theatre Department, who is developing with us the *Theatre Finder*, a collaboratively edited, peer-reviewed, online database of historic theatre architecture from the Minoan "theatrical areas" on the island of Crete to the last theatre built before 1815. Frank is among some thirty faculty and graduate student fellows whose work has been supported by MITH over the years in projects that have ranged from well before 1776 in the *Early Americas Digital Archive* to *Soweto '76,* which explores the ways that multimedia digital archives can help foster a social justice–based agenda for marginalized communities, particularly in South Africa. When MITH faculty fellow Angel David Nieves, the project director of *Soweto '76*, moved from the University of Maryland to Hamilton College, he initiated a very successful digital humanities initiative there,[4] an example of how existing centers can, as it were, cross-pollinate the field.

Moving about five feet farther down the central aisle from Frank Hildy, we find Rachel Donahue, a MITH graduate research assistant from the University of Maryland's iSchool, who is preparing for the weekly meeting of MITH's Preserving

Virtual Worlds Group, led by Matt Kirschenbaum, one of our associate directors, and by Kari Kraus, a faculty member in the iSchool and English Department. Our group has worked with researchers at Stanford, the University of Illinois, and the Rochester Institute of Technology on a grant from the Library of Congress to help improve the capacity of libraries, museums, and archives to preserve computer games, virtual worlds, and interactive fiction. The project team, which has already published a two-hundred-page report on preservation strategies, was short-listed for the prestigious Digital Preservation Coalition Prize and has recently received a large grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to continue their work (Kirschenbaum et al.).

After walking another five feet farther down the central aisle, we stand in front of three doors. To our right is Matt's office. To our left is the office of MITH's business manager, Chris Grogan, who has been completing the paperwork for the second phase of *OAC*, or the *Open Annotation Collaboration*,[5] whose purpose is to create an interoperable web annotation environment that enables the sharing of annotations across the boundaries of annotation clients, annotation servers, and content collections. The founding partners of this Mellon-funded project include the University of Illinois and George Mason's Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media.

Directly in front of us, at the end of our tour, is MITH's seminar room, which houses the Deena Larsen Collection,[6] a rich archive of early-era personal computers and software for researchers from within or beyond the campus interested in early hypertext and electronic literature and for MITH's own in-house research in digital curation and preservation. In the seminar room, we also teach classes, hold meetings and consultations, and host on Tuesday afternoons Digital Dialogues, a talk or presentation featuring either an invited guest to the campus or a member of our local research community. Since 2005, MITH has hosted over eighty of these Digital Dialogues, featuring many of the most prominent names in the field and attended by people throughout the greater Washington, D.C., area. For those who can't attend in person, we release each Digital Dialogue as a podcast.

Retracing our steps, toward the door, we pass my office, in front of which I bid you farewell in order to join the faculty members from our dance, kinesiology, and computer science departments who are working with MITH on a project for the digital documentation and preservation of dance, in partnership with the Kennedy Center, the New York Public Library, Lincoln Center, and the Advanced Computing Center for the Arts and Design at Ohio State University.

This tableaux did not take shape overnight. MITH was made possible twelve years ago by a major Challenge Grant from NEH under the joint auspices of the University of Maryland's College of Arts and Humanities, Libraries, and Office of Information Technology. It began with a director and two graduate research assistants and over the years has grown to ten faculty and full-time personnel as well as about a dozen full- or part-time staff members supported through grant funding,

graduate assistantships, federal work study, and internships—by most measures a relatively large digital humanities center.

Complementing MITH's research and intellectual mission is a host of conferences, public programs, workshops, and events, most of which are free and open to the community. In the past year alone, MITH has hosted workshops on computer forensics for born-digital materials, advanced Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) manuscript encoding, alternative digital humanities academic careers, and the building of Application Programming Interfaces (APIs). MITH is also developing certificate programs and degrees in digital humanities. In partnership with the Computer Science Department and the iSchool, it has recently initiated Digital Cultures and Creativity, an innovative curriculum and learning community for first- and second-year students that combines art, imagination, and global citizenship with new media and new technologies. We conceive of MITH as an applied think tank, a place where theory and practice meet on a daily and a broadly interdisciplinary basis. Located in McKeldin Library at the heart of the campus, MITH serves as a campus-wide hub and regional destination for those interested in the digital humanities and new media.

This extended sketch of MITH is meant to convey as concretely as possible the diverse kinds of research and the complex blend of faculty, staff, students, disciplines, partnerships, audiences, and funding streams that revolve around a major digital humanities center. As MITH helps to illustrate, digital humanities centers have a great capacity for focusing, maximizing, and networking local knowledge, local resources, and local communities of practice for benefits that extend far beyond the immediate campus community. There is a limit to what any one center can accomplish on its own, however, which is why MITH helped to launch centerNet, an international network of digital humanities centers.[7]

The Local Center and the Global Network

In the preface to *A Survey of Digital Humanities Centers in the United States*, a report published by the Council of Library and Information Resources, Amy Friedlander appreciates that many digital humanities centers have "incubated important research, fostered a generation of humanities scholars who are comfortable with the technology, devised creative modes of governance, assembled diverse portfolios of funding strategies, and built significant digital collections and suites of tools" (Zorich, vi–vii). But she warns that since most centers are "focused on their home institutions, they are at risk of becoming silos" and that such "institutional parochialism can inhibit the building of shared resources, like repositories, or of services, like long-term preservation, that represent a shared infrastructure where the impact of the shared resource is enhanced precisely because multiple parties contribute to and use it"(vii). In the main body of the report, Diane Zorich similarly claims that "the independent nature of existing centers does not effectively leverage resources

community-wide; . . . large-scale, coordinated efforts to address the 'big' issues in building humanities cyberinfrastructure . . . are missing from the current landscape. Collaborations among existing centers are small and focus on individual partner interests that do not scale up to address community wide needs" (4–5).

The pull of local campus pressures can indeed work against external collaboration, and the consequent insularity of many centers leaves them ignorant about the work actively being done by the others. The competition among centers for prestige and relatively scarce funding resources exacerbates this problem, as does the difficulty of working across national boundaries, cultural divides, and language communities. These centripetal forces are powerful; and, to the extent that they are not overcome, they drastically limit the significance of the work done by individual centers.

It was precisely to address these pressing issues, to network the local with the global, and to establish individual digital humanities centers as key nodes of international cyberinfrastructure that centerNet was born at an American summit meeting of digital humanities centers and funders in April 2007 cohosted by the NEH and MITH. The American term "cyberinfrastructure," much like the European term "e-science," can be defined as the linking together of computing systems, data storage systems, tools and data repositories, visualization and virtual research environments, people, and communities of practice by software, shared standards, and high performance networks in order "to improve research productivity and enable breakthroughs not otherwise possible" (Stewart). The importance of digital humanities centers "as crucial seedbeds of innovation" and key nodes of American cyberinfrastructure was stressed in *Our Cultural Commonwealth,* a report on cyberinfrastructure for the humanities and social sciences, commissioned by the American Council of Learned Societies and released in 2006, which served as the immediate catalyst of the summit meeting.

Currently consisting of some 250 members from over 140 digital humanities centers in twenty countries, centerNet has four regional steering committees: in Asia Pacific, Europe, North America, and the UK and Ireland. Its initiatives include the following:

- Promoting regional meetings, workshops, and conferences for the purposes of intellectual exchange, solidifying community, and the professional development of staff and graduate students
- Connecting centers around the world along the lines of their methodological affinities for sharing expertise and collaborative project development
- Nurturing a new generation of hybrid scholars, working in staff positions that combine service and research components
- Developing collaboratively new curricular models
- Legitimating the field and the value of digital humanities centers, especially in countries where digital humanities is only just emerging

- Developing mechanisms for assessing digital humanities centers and peer review among centers
- Advocating on behalf of the field, both within and outside the academy
- Working with funders to shape new opportunities that foster international collaborations and lobbying on behalf of our funders
- Working with other large cyberinfrastructure projects such as DARIAH and CLARIN
- Establishing formal affiliations with like-minded organizations, including those already established with the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI),[8] CHAIN, the Digital Library Federation, and 4Humanities

The Center as Agent of Transformation

Underlying centerNet's various initiatives is a strategic vision of the place of the digital humanities center in the institutional history of the academy. Over a hundred years ago, the current disciplinary structure of the humanities assumed its present shape, and though the world has changed much since then humanities disciplines have not.[9] New programs in such areas as gender studies, race studies, and cultural studies, among others, have often been relegated to the province of the humanities centers that started to appear in significant numbers in the second half of the twentieth century, precisely in order to accommodate what the traditional humanities departments could not in the form of interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary studies.

More recently, digital humanities centers have sprung up to accommodate the challenges to the traditional humanities posed by new media and technologies and the particular forms of knowledge and cross-disciplinarity they entail.[10] Humanities centers of both kinds have thus been historically positioned to dream the future of the university, so to speak, to take the lead in scholarly innovation and disciplinary transformation. Their ultimate function at the present time is not just to help set the agenda for the new humanities to come but to work in practical ways to help bring this transformation about. Crucial to realizing this goal is centerNet's five-year formal affiliation with the CHCI, through which both organizations have agreed to work together to build scholarly and technical capacity in the field of digital humanities by way of shared grant projects, shared training, and shared events, beginning with a joint conference at the University of Toronto in June 2011.

The digital humanities center as an institution can enable such large transformations to start close to home. As Amy Friedlander notes,

> In an environment where scholars identify with their disciplines rather than with their departments, and where significant professional affiliations or communities of interest may transcend the boundaries of scholars' colleges and universities, centers offer interdisciplinary "third places"—a term sociologist Ray Oldenburg has used to identify a social space, distinct from home and workplace. Third

> places foster important ties and are critical to community life. Familiar examples are barbershops, beauty salons, and coffee shops where, in the age of wireless, we see tables of students hunched over laptops, textbooks, and notepads. (Zorich, vi)

For Friedlander, within the kind of "third place" typified by digital humanities centers, "technology is simultaneously a driver and an opportunity, and the centers, whether virtual or physical, effectively become safe places, hospitable to innovation and experimentation, as well as anchors from which to base the intellectual analog of civil society in which third places are vital parts" (Zorich, vi). Such "safe places" are crucial not only because all the cyberinfrastructure in the world won't amount to much if scholars within the humanities disciplines aren't using it but also because they mitigate the risks posed by the kind of interdisciplinary teamwork that *A Digital Humanities Manifesto* correctly identifies as the "new model for the production and reproduction of humanistic knowledge" (para. 10).

The ultimate function of the digital humanities center at the present time, then, is to be an agent of change. As Steve Ramsay has observed in his blog posting "Centers of Attention," "We like to marvel at the technological wonders that proceed from things like servers, but in this case—I would say, in all cases—the miracle of 'computers in the humanities' is the way it forced even a highly balkanized academy into new kinds of social formations. Anyone involved with any of these big centers will tell you that they are rare sites of genuine collaboration and intellectual synergy—that they explode disciplinary boundaries and even the cherished hierarchies of academic rank." Ramsay also notes that the capacity of individual centers to produce such transformations is dependent on the degree to which its university administrators treat them as research units, valuing them "not because of the services they provide, but because of the culture they represent—a culture that has always been about the two things we value most: the advancement of knowledge and the education of students." Even the longstanding division in which a humanities faculty position is primarily equated with research while a staff position is equated with service is being altered in digital humanities centers, which are increasingly being staffed by a new kind of hybrid scholar with advanced degrees in the humanities and their own research agendas.[11]

A Digital Humanities Manifesto is right to claim that "Interdisciplinarity/transdisciplinarity/multidisciplinarity are empty words unless they imply changes in language, practice, method, and output" (para. 5). These kinds of changes are social, cultural, and even economic as much as they are technological. But they are also profoundly international in their effect and potential effectiveness and might therefore be called the "cosmopolitics" of the digital humanities, to adapt Kant's term for the "universal community" that cuts across all national borders. To the extent that digital humanities centers can work together despite the formidable forces that keep them apart, they can engage at this cosmopolitical level. If

the function of digital humanities centers at the present time is indeed disciplinary innovation and transformation, work together they must.

So much for the function of digital humanities centers at the present time; what about the future? If digital humanities centers are successful in fomenting such change, would they still be necessary? Are they a "transitional model," helping to produce their own obsolescence? As more and more humanities centers incorporate and welcome the digital, will there still be a need for stand-alone digital humanities centers? Would this even be an undesirable scenario? Many of these same questions are now being asked about the digital humanities itself as a field. The jury, as they say, is still out. In a collection of essays about debates in the digital humanities, the ultimate sustainability of digital humanities centers is one debate yet to be had. But I suspect that the humanities will in one way or another always need an institutional space for technical innovation, that disciplinary transformations beget and require still other kinds of change, and that to the extent digital humanities centers are willing, able, and necessary to fulfill this need, they will be around long into the future.

NOTES

1. Project Bamboo. http://www.projectbamboo.org.

2. The Shakespeare Quartos Archive. http://mith.umd.edu/research/?project=58.

3. The Text-Image Linking Environment (TILE). http://mith.umd.edu/tile.

4. Digital Humanities Initiative, Hamilton College. http://www.dhinitiative.org/about/mission.php.

5. Open Annotation Collaboration. http://www.openannotation.org.

6. The Deena Larsen Collection. http://mith.umd.edu/larsen/dlcs.

7. centerNet. http://digitalhumanities.org/centernet.

8. Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI). http://chcinetwork.org.

9. For a detailed history and critique of humanities disciplines that informs my own discussion here, see Chandler and Davidson, *Fate of Disciplines*, esp. Chandler's introduction, 729–46.

10. For an early attempt to provide a taxonomy of centers, see McCarty and Kirschenbaum, "Institutional Models." The centerNet website provides the most up-to-date list of current centers, along with descriptions of them.

11. For a detailed discussion and analysis of this phenomenon, see Clement and Reside and the following essay in this volume by Julia Flanders.

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