**MORGAN — Question**

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**The Question of the Luminary: Building a Resilient Campus DH Culture**

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This paper explores a phenomenon that we have both noticed in recent years: that digital humanities programs and progress are driven by the presence of luminaries. A DH luminary is someone who identifies clearly as a digital humanist and is known in the international DH community; they are the people who keynote at DH, DHSI, and similar conferences. The presence of a luminary leads to significant success in attracting grant funding, graduate students, speaking engagements, etc. We are not the only ones who have noticed this phenomenon. In his 2011 blog entry ‘The (DH) Stars Come Out in LA’, Matt Kirschenbaum calls for a more direct engagement by DHers with the effects of celebrity in the field.

In discussing luminary figures, it is not our intention to criticize them or in any way to diminish the hard work that has contributed to their status. Instead, we want to discuss the challenges that luminaries present for developing a resilient DH culture that supports training and individual member projects, and which will persist even if the luminary departs. While acquiring a luminary can go a long ways towards ‘making DH happen’ at a school, it can also engender concerns for future sustainability. In this paper, we address a few of the specific trade-offs/challenges that luminaries present, and identify actions that schools wanting to develop a DH initiative could take. By DH initiative, we mean the alchemistic mix of a DH community, program (i.e., formalized instruction, whether certificate or degree), physical centres, and DH-focused research entities that taken in sum represent a given institution’s DH culture. A DH initiative is intended to be a sustained and ongoing investment, rather than the temporary program of a pre-determined span of time.

Besides funding and publicity, luminaries contribute direction to a DH program, orienting its content towards a particular area: making, text analysis, software development, pedagogy, etc. Another vital (though intangible) ingredient that luminaries bring is the insurance of having succeeded previously. A luminary’s presence can serve as justification for a new and relatively untested practice. Both of these qualities are especially important in light of the lack of general DH knowledge distributed throughout humanities departments. Arguably, then, the presence of a luminary provides a DH program with a specific identity. Luminaries help to ensure success of a particular kind, easily recognisable in traditional departments, even when the medium of scholarship is different: a project is released, generating responses within the disciplinary community.

Without a luminary, a new DH centre will lack the insurance of previous successes as well as the established identity/direction. The work of achieving both components will then fall on the centre’s faculty, staff, and early participating graduate students. This creates an uphill slope for those involved: a substantial part of their work will involve trial-and-error experimentation, and their progress will almost certainly depend on their finding local allies, and their ability to connect with larger DH social networks either in person or via social media. This type of work is undeniably valuable, and applicable to many contexts, within and outside of academia. However, the work that is about producing infrastructure and culture, rather than scholarship, gains the most plaudits—in short, the work that leads to luminary status.

A luminary at the helm is an attractive prospect for any university that wants to make a substantial investment in the digital humanities. Moreover, universities love quick victories that give rise to press releases, photo ops, and instant notoriety. In light of the continuing lack of funding for higher education, and for humanities initiatives in general, acquiring a luminary figure to guide development may seem like the best strategy for ensuring that a new DH initiative will not fail. However, a sustainable DH community does not necessarily follow from a quick victory. More often, such a community is a slow-burn development involving a wide range of people and the formation of collaborative relationships that contribute to student training and career growth for all involved. The advantages that come with luminaries can be accompanied by challenges, specifically:

• The leadership of a luminary figure can generate energetic activity in an initiative—but this activity may reflect the luminary’s charisma rather than the growth of a widespread DH culture within the community.

• Luminaries, while powerful, are not guarantors of continuity: contingency plans are needed for sabbaticals or departures.

• While DH ostensibly transcends disciplinary boundaries, when programs are built around luminaries their disciplinary focus may be overemphasized, excluding other disciplines.

• Luminaries’ successes can become normative, creating challenges for those who want to develop new initiatives. Instead of looking at a particular community’s strengths and needs, the goal becomes reproducing what was achieved with a previous initiative or at another university. The result is that the culture of DH becomes more narrow, rather than becoming more varied and diverse.

These challenges can be summed up by saying that luminaries seem to provide instant infrastructure, when in reality, their contribution is superstructure.

As we consider the future of digital humanities on a global scale, the question we focus on is how to make a DH space and/or community accessible that allows all interested graduate students, staff, and faculty to be fully involved in shaping the collective identity of their campus DH culture, so that leadership is shared and can easily pass from person to person, with no single individual responsible for carrying the community. Such a community may have luminaries in it—but the sustainability of the program does not depend on their presence.

DH initiatives and programs often face scalability and sustainability challenges. Even the brightest of luminaries is only one person and can mentor only a limited number of students. Currently, luminaries are especially valuable as evangelists for DH, drawing people in, but eventually the number of eager community members will outpace the luminary. How will universities address the needs that arise when this moment arrives? We will close by presenting specific strategies for broadening and diversifying the development of DH initiatives, and for making the development of DH culture the collective work of communities, rather than of a single individual.