**ANTONIJEVIC — Organizational**

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**Organizational Practices in Digital Humanities Centers**

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This paper addresses organizational practices and activities of digital humanities centers (DHC). The paper draws on an ethnographic study conducted from 2010 to 2013. Through case studies, surveys, interviews, and observations, the study explored how scholars engage with and think about digital research tools and methods, analyzed teams developing digital research tools, and observed organizational practices related to DHCs. The fieldwork was carried out at twenty-three educational, research, and funding institutions in the United States and Europe, and it involved 258 participants including researchers, faculty, students, administrators, librarians, software developers, policymakers, and funders.

DHCs emerged as an academic organizational unit in the 1980s (Fraistat, 2012), representing ‘key sites for bridging the daunting gap between new technology and humanities scholars’ (Terras, 2012, 281). Over the past three decades, the number of DHCs grew, yet not as intensely and widely as humanists’ engagement with digital technologies (Zorich, 2008).

DHCs analyzed in this study were founded from the early 1990s up to the present time. All centers are affiliated with research-intensive universities, have a dedicated space, and employ between five and fifteen staff members, mostly traditionally trained humanists with advanced computational skills.

A significant difference among the analyzed DHCs distinguished the bottom-up versus top-down initiatives. In the top-down initiatives, university administrators sought to establish hubs of scholarly innovation, yet often without a clear sense of what that innovation entailed. For instance, one DHC featured new glass walls as a visually transparent boundary between the print and the electronic materials, while flexible workspaces with high-end technologies were designed to adjust to user needs. But while design, ergonomic, and technical features were meticulously considered, the goals for the center were given less attention:

That’s really a big question for us, what kind of services we want to offer. Are people going to know what to do? Are they going to come in, sit down, and check e-mail? [director of a DHC]

Another campus of the same university launched its DHC simultaneously, but the initiators were humanities scholars rather than the administrators. They began with a university-wide dialogue, which included humanities faculty and students, information technologists, librarians, and other stakeholders. These early conversations and comprehensive planning helped identify organizational strategies and design possibilities consistent with their goals, resulting in a well-defined mission for the new unit.

A number of the analyzed DHCs aspire to support humanists’ general research and to gradually introduce scholars to digital tools and methods. These centers target the widest spectrum of humanists rather than those already versed in or inclined to using digital tools, thus bridging the critical gap between more and less technologically advanced scholars. Yet, with such a diverse user community, they sometimes struggle to profile their activities. Humanists’ interest in digital tools and methods varies as much as their skills, and addressing such a spectrum of proficiencies and needs is anything but straightforward. Some DHCs thus adopt a more precisely defined approach when establishing goals and characterizing their potential user base. However, parallel functioning of DHCs within the same institution, differentiated according to the funding sources and the target user-base, often increases fragmentation of work and user confusion.

Considering the hesitation toward digital scholarship that traditionally trained humanists sometimes hold, DHCs’ outreach often involves two preparatory steps: (1) making humanists aware that they already rely on digital technologies and (2) explaining that DHCs are offeringdigital tools and methods rather than imposingthem. The perception of digital tools and methods as ‘data crunching’ and incompatible with humanistic hermeneutics contributes to lower uptake of these technologies among humanists. DHCs play a considerable role in breaking down the complexities of those shifting epistemic practices and values.One part of the task is familiarizing humanists with the epistemological and methodological elements of the transition towards digital scholarship. Another component depends on making the transition manageable to grasp and adopt:

And I think we’ve been able to break that down into smaller steps that people can make without dumbing it down, without making it seem trivial, but really emphasizing the real shift in thinking that’s happening in the humanities, and supporting that with the technical side. [codirector of a DHC]

This study showed that humanists favor and best learn in practice, when instruction is closely related to their area of study and when it unfolds organically, through collaboration with peers or graduate students. Instead of skill-based training, humanities education in digital scholarship needs a comprehensive framework encompassing epistemological, methodological, technical, and sociocultural aspects of digital knowledge production. Furthermore, in their outreach activities, DHCs frequently stumble upon the scholars’ lack of time:

These are very busy people, and they are ultimately making choices between do they go and pay attention to our offer of a demonstration about digital tools, or do they spend that hour focusing on their own research questions. We’re competing with natural priorities in a scholar’s life. [director of a DHC]

It is therefore vital that education in digital scholarship becomes administratively recognized as part of scholars’ professional development included in their paid time and activity, as well as in their promotion dossiers.

DHCs often employ hybrids—traditionally trained humanists who also have good computational skills. They are seen as a necessary link between ‘the two cultures’, who can adeptly translate epistemological and methodological concepts and approaches. ‘Smart organizations will have more of me’, remarked the head of the research and development team at one of the centers, a historian with good programming skills. The advantage of speaking both ‘programese’ and ‘scholarese’, as this interviewee put it, is the capacity to help humanists grasp digital tools and methods while helping programmers understand humanities work.

DHCs have found an efficient way of employing hybrids through engaging humanities graduate students, usually early adopters of technology. Graduate students who participated in the study liked working at DHCs. It allowed them to advance their research skills and to build expertise through participation in important research and decision-making activities. The reversal of instructional roles, in which students were teaching teachers, facilitated students’ understanding of some of the didactic principles motivating them to develop their own pedagogic strategies.

Hybrids as a type of scholarly workforce are linked to the concept of alternative academic careers. Participants in this study described alternative academic paths as intentional career choices scholars make. Although this choice allows scholars to continue working in their preferred field, the transition is nonetheless perceived as difficult and consequential: ‘You can’t just yank somebody out of the faculty and out of years or decades of training without some accounting for how they conceive of themselves as a scholar,’ said an associate professor of English. From the administrative point of view, thinking about people’s time and labor is an important issue DHCs need to engage with, because the inherited systems of classifying employees are not well suited to digital scholarship.

Traditional organizational systems are not only inefficient for addressing contemporary issues of academic labor and knowledge production; they are also potentially detrimental to the future of scholarly work:

If we can’t get this generation of graduate students comfortable with alternate modes of work, not feeling like they are failures if they don’t get a tenure-track position, and seeing good career paths for themselves within the DH, we’re going to lose that generation of scholars. [professor of history]

Among the respondents, two related but disparate theories of the future of DHCs emerged. One suggests that digital tools and methods will progressively become a standard part of humanities research; DH should thus be seen as a transitional moment in the humanities disciplines rather than as a distinct field. Another approach held that the need for innovative work and thinking with technology in the humanities would never cease. Although the use of digital tools and methods will become increasingly mainstream, there will always be a need for research groups on the frontier of innovation. Scholars and administrators both mused about whether DHCs will be needed in the future, or whether digital scholarship will blend into existing disciplinary and departmental structures. Overall, the respondents agreed that we will see a wave of interest in DHCs, some of which will persist, while others will peak quickly, only to fade away.

**References**

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