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## Laying the Foundation

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# **Part 1**

## **WHY DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN THE LIBRARY?**



# 1 | Recovering a Humanist Librarianship through Digital Humanities

*Trevor Muñoz*

## INTRODUCTION

The many discussions—at conferences, on blogs, and in the professional literature—about how librarians can best engage with the digital humanities (DH) reveal a notable absence. The position of digital humanities work in many academic research libraries—as a service point for specialized consulting or training—suggests that DH is widely seen as external to the core functions of research libraries. What this suggests, in the context of librarianship’s historical development as a profession, is that the possibilities of digital humanities research in the library have been shaped by the absence of a strong tradition of humanist library theory and practice. Incorporating digital humanities into the conceptual equipment and the work practices of more librarians could help to develop a tradition of humanist librarianship suited to our present technological age.

## THE VALUE OF DIGITAL HUMANITIES BEYOND THE TACTICAL

Because of librarianship’s history, there is particular risk in treating the digital humanities as “a tactical term.”<sup>1</sup> Much of the current debate over the place of digital humanities within librarianship is unsatisfying precisely to the extent that it is occupied with “the reality of circumstances in which [‘the digital humanities’] is unabashedly deployed to get things done—‘things’ that might include getting a faculty line or funding a staff position, . . . revamping a lab, or launching a center.”<sup>2</sup> If, in an academic library context, support for “the digital humanities” can generate support for a new

space or a new professional position, why not package the digital humanities with another new activity and refer to the whole as “digital scholarship” and multiply the potential return by appealing to other, wealthier precincts of a campus at the same time? From a tactical, managerial perspective—indeed, why not? This chapter will suggest that it may be possible for librarianship to win a great deal of tactical success but lose out on an intellectual transformation vital to the profession’s longevity and impact.

### **READING “RESEARCH”**

Behind and beneath many of the current debates about how to understand and incorporate digital humanities are larger and more long-standing questions about the place of “research” in librarianship. Reflecting, from the perspective of a library administrator, on some of the institutional challenges that often block librarians from doing digital humanities, Mike Furlough concludes: “Is research the library’s core business?”<sup>3</sup> This question is only one instance of a concern that repeatedly breaks into the open at the fault line between the tactical and the intellectual considerations of digital humanities. As Furlough again asks: “Research . . . sure, it’s a core activity of the faculty, but is it a core business function of the University?” Despite its facetiousness, this response highlights the doubled nature of these and similar objections to the place of research, and by extension the digital humanities, in librarianship. First, there is an “othering” of research as a domain belonging to “the faculty” (regardless of the fact that librarians at many institutions hold some kind of faculty status). Second, the common patterns of professional discourse seem to divide research into two kinds: topics related to the efficient business operations of libraries as institutional structures, and everything else.<sup>4</sup> The former is strongly preferred so that, even when research is admitted as part of librarianship, it seems like an extension of management.

Lest the foregoing critique be mistakenly assumed to apply to one or a few individuals, a close reading of a report/editorial titled “Top Trends in Academic Libraries,” authored by no less a professional/institutionalized voice than the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Research Planning and Review Committee, exhibits many of the same features. This report, published in the June 2014 issue of *College and Research Libraries News*, functions as a kind of prioritized environmental

scan produced by a major professional organization and is meant, one suspects, as less a communication of new findings than as a confirmation—a mutual signaling that there is sufficient national momentum to consider this particular evolving area a good bet for some kind of engagement in a library’s local environment. The statement on digital humanities reads, in its entirety:

Academic libraries can play a key role in supporting humanities faculty in their research by creating partnerships and collaborations and helping to connect with other campus units needed to implement and carry out digital humanities research.<sup>5</sup>

Almost everything about this summary seems, if not wrong as a description of a certain common attitude, then at least equally revealing of assumptions about librarianship that transcend the particular issue of digital humanities.

From the first phrase—“Academic libraries can play a key role . . .”—there are signs of trouble. The substitution of an institution, “academic libraries,” for any specific actors (i.e., the librarians who make an institution what it is) signals that the claims to follow are directed toward the marketing and perpetuation of a particular organizational structure rather than anything else.<sup>6</sup> The next phrase identifies a target market segment (“humanities faculty”) for this pitch. The assertion that “academic libraries can play a key role in supporting *humanities faculty* in their research” (emphasis added) again locates “research” somewhere else on campus and not also within libraries conducted and directed by librarians. The fact that the members of the ACRL committee who selected digital humanities meant to highlight opportunities for collaboration but handle the subject in a way that undermines its possibilities suggests an internal dissonance worth noting. If digital humanities research belongs to the faculty, what is the basis for “deeper” collaboration that is not merely instrumental? Noting that roles for librarians in digital humanities work are often shaped toward things that librarians are perceived to be good at doing, like project management, Roxanne Shirazi asks: “What does [it] mean for collaborative scholarship between librarians and faculty when project management and other ‘major service activit[ies]’ [are] so clearly secondary to ‘actual research’?”<sup>7</sup> In the passage by the ACRL committee quoted above, the way in which the specific language on collaboration is constructed leaves ambiguous whether

librarians are counted in these collaborations and connections or whether librarians are merely facilitating, moving jigsaw pieces around to connect other unrelated parties in a kind of a matchmaking service that leaves the library-as-institution safely funded but ultimately uncommitted.

The language of the last section of the ACRL committee’s statement on digital humanities has industrial overtones: libraries “help to connect with other campus *units* needed to *implement* and *carry out* digital humanities research” (emphasis added). This description echoes one of the more stinging caricatures of digital humanities, from Alan Liu’s essay “Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities”:

It is as if, when the order comes down from the funding agencies, university administrations, and other bodies mediating today’s dominant socioeconomic and political beliefs, digital humanists just concentrate on pushing the “execute” button on projects that amass the most data for the greatest number, process that data most efficiently and flexibly (flexible efficiency being the hallmark of postindustrialism), and manage the whole through ever “smarter” standards, protocols, schema, templates, and databases uplifting Frederick Winslow Taylor’s original scientific industrialism into ultraflexible postindustrial content management systems camouflaged as digital editions, libraries, and archives—all without pausing to reflect on the relation of the whole digital juggernaut to the new world order.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly, there are things that need to be implemented and carried out to bring research to fruition. Data needs to be processed, standards do need to be updated and upheld, and faculty need to be supported. Yet, to frame libraries’ engagement with the possibilities of digital humanities in ways that draw unreflectively from this Taylorist tradition is to risk falling into the caricature that Liu critiques and to miss the real, transformative value that digital humanities work can offer.

## **UNCOVERING HISTORIES OF THE LIBRARIAN ROLE**

Is it possible to find historical origins for some of these assumptions that seem to shape and condition the possibilities for digital humanities librarianship in unfortunate ways?

Discourses around the issue of “research” lead back to and through a particular set of historical contingencies (in the U.S. context) that have created this current “librarianship” that seems sufficiently incommensurable with the modern humanities to potentially blunt the transformative possibilities of a digital humanities. Library historian Wayne Wiegand traces some of these contingencies back to the “unique professional configuration that librarianship assumed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.”<sup>9</sup> By professional “configuration,” Wiegand means the structure of claims librarianship made for unique expertise and authority “in the fast-growing world of new professions.”<sup>10</sup> He argues that the socioeconomic class and educational background of most late-nineteenth-century librarians and library administrators was such that these groups shared relatively homogenous ideas about a cultural canon and the relationship between literacy and a certain form of social order.<sup>11</sup> Thus, according to Wiegand, “[T]he library science that emerged . . . generally embraced two practical concerns: the ‘science’ of administering an institutional bureaucracy and an expertise unique to the institution being administered.”<sup>12</sup> Casting this in more general terms, Christine Pawley observed that library and information studies have chiefly operated within discourses of “pluralism” and “managerialism.”<sup>13</sup>

The absence of a humanist tradition of library theory and practice cannot be directly connected to the imprint of information-work-as-industrial-labor that Wiegand and Pawley describe. In the late 1920s, a group of researchers and library leaders, which became quite influential due to the crucial aid and funding of the Carnegie Corporation, made a concerted effort to enlarge the definition of what could be meant by librarianship using the ascendant episteme of their day: “science.”<sup>14</sup>

The locus for the group’s efforts was the newly created Graduate Library School (GLS) at the University of Chicago. Where earlier library schools were largely, even explicitly, vocational by the 1920s, as Harris recounts, “This practical . . . , intuitive, and experiential approach to education began to draw some fire.”<sup>15</sup> The GLS was one response to this situation—it represented the culmination of several years of professional debate as well as a stream of funding from the Carnegie Corporation. In the first issue of *The Library Quarterly* (*LQ*), the new professional journal born of the same reform initiatives, Douglas Waples, the acting dean as well as a faculty member in the school, noted mildly that, because much of the



editorial work of producing the *LQ* was to be done by GLS staff, “readers of the journal should accordingly have some interest in the School’s policies and activities which the journal must in some measure reflect.”<sup>16</sup> Waples’s article set off a highly visible round of the contentious debate over what the GLS project represented for librarianship. It is worth emphasizing that contemporaries on both sides recognized that plans for the new school represented a site at which the meaning of “librarianship” was being (re)constructed—largely through a debate about the character of “research.”

The heart of the contention was Waples’s discussion, halfway through his report on “policies and activities” in *LQ*, of “the sort of library science to which research during the next years should contribute.” What is crucial to note is that “science” in this context had a historically specific valence. In outlining the program of the GLS, Waples marks his allegiance to a version of “science” created and popularized by the philosopher John Dewey. Dewey gained enormous influence as a popularizer of “science” by promoting a version of the scientific method as a flexible and generalizable approach to problem solving across domains.<sup>17</sup> Dewey’s approach differed from an earlier wave of science popularizers in the late nineteenth century who promulgated descriptions of science as an offshoot of rigorous logic and empiricism.<sup>18</sup> Dewey’s interest in science was as a model of knowledge construction: “Science signifies . . . the existence of systematic methods of inquiry, which when they are brought to bear on a range of facts, enable us to understand them better and control them more intelligently.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, in his article on “What Is a Library Science?,” Waples declares that Dewey’s book *The Sources of a Science of Education*:

gives organization and clear perspective to the pros and cons of scientific method as applied to a social enterprise like librarianship. No writing has appeared to date which in short space so helpfully presents a philosophy of research in the social studies.<sup>20</sup>

Waples’s chief interlocutor in the pages of *LQ*, C. Seymour Thompson, begins his first reply by noting archly that “It seems we have become pretty well agreed that we have not now a library science, but we are apparently determined that we will have one.”<sup>21</sup> Yet Thompson largely accepts Dewey’s “science” as the definitional ground upon which the debate over a “library science” will be conducted.

To understand the prospects of digital humanities ideas and approaches in librarianship, the more interesting elements of the debates over “library science” and the GLS are the responses of critics, especially those critics arguing from a humanist tradition. Thompson’s critique of Waples and the GLS program is not the defense of a status quo, but is instead an alternate proposal for reform. He accepts the findings (if not the recommendations) of reports, such as that prepared by C. C. Williamson, which described shortcomings in the professional background and training of librarians—the same reports that provided the impetus for the founding of the GLS. “We ourselves have too generally undervalued educational qualifications,”<sup>22</sup> Thompson writes. Thompson rejects the earlier, narrowly vocational managerial vision of librarianship: “In developing a body of administrative methods adequate to meet the needs of the new ideals of service, for a long period we placed an exaggerated emphasis on technique and routine, from which we have not yet entirely recovered.”<sup>23</sup> He also critiques the new vision of librarianship as Dewey-ian social research: “Regardless of what may have been accomplished by the new research in other fields . . . our problems, our circumstances, and particularly, our aims and purposes differ so greatly from those of business that the analogy here is not trustworthy.”<sup>24</sup> Thompson centers his alternative proposal on a link between libraries and a high-culture Victorian humanism: “In trying to prove that we were of actual dollars and cents value, we lost much of the older admiration for the cultural value of the library.”<sup>25</sup> Instead he advocates for “a revival of the *bibliothecal* spirit”<sup>26</sup> (original emphasis) in the training and practices of librarianship. The classical Greek and Latin origins of “bibliothecal,” an adjective meaning “belonging to a library” (OED), only emphasize the alignment between Thompson’s “good books” and a Western cultural canon—something like Matthew Arnold’s “the best that has been thought and said.”<sup>27</sup>

John V. Richardson, in his history of the GLS, notes that even though the Carnegie Corporation was the force behind the school, there were some in the corporation who were skeptical of its direction. These included Robert M. Lester, a “policy adviser” who reviewed some of the reports on the school’s direction and goals prepared by Waples. Lester worried that the program of research as outlined would “result in dehumanizing the librarian as being a mathematically minded pseudo-educator in place of a man of books to aid those in research of reading material—with and without a purpose.”<sup>28</sup>

In the pages of *LQ*, Thompson embraced librarianship as an educational enterprise but in terms that aligned education with an identifiable humanist tradition and against Dewey and Waples. “If librarianship is primarily an educational profession, its fundamental and dominating purpose must be educational; if its principal purpose is educational, the most important qualification for a librarian must be—education.”<sup>29</sup> Making reference to a presidential address given by Charles Coffin Jewett, librarian and assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, at the 1853 conventions of librarians that was one of the precursors to the founding of the American Library Association, Thompson goes on to aver that “the most important qualification for librarianship, the qualification that must underlie all others, is ‘a knowledge of good books,’ with the high standards of education which that presupposes.” Lester and Thompson seem to share a concept of “education” that opposes the “science” and “research” concepts of Waples and Dewey.

Lester’s “pseudo-educator” who emphasizes “derival and application of formulae” is a figure of the Dewey-ian man. In this Lester seems to share Thompson’s ideal of the educator as someone trained in the appreciation of a cultural canon—the “knowledge of good books” to which Jewett referred a half-century earlier. Here then at the beginning of the 1930s are representatives of a recognizable humanist tradition alert to the emergence of a competing episteme and actively engaging with it in debates over the nature of librarianship. What is significant about these debates is that they mark a phasing out of a humanist approach to library theory and practice (such as it was). Since the early twentieth century, the prevailing discourse of librarianship has mixed managerialism and social research approaches largely without admixture of methodological traditions from the humanities.

## A NEW HUMANIST LIBRARIANSHIP?

In 2002, Jerome McGann, director of the *Rossetti Archive*, one of the most significant early digital projects to appear on the World Wide Web, used a prominent editorial in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* to urge his fellow literary scholars to engage with what was then called *humanities computing* and is now better known as *digital humanities*.<sup>30</sup> McGann forecast that “in the next 50 years, the entirety of our inherited archive of cultural works will have to be re-edited within a network of digital storage, access, and dissemination”<sup>31</sup> and he observed, with some apparent misgivings, that his humanist

colleagues were largely being preceded in this project by librarians. By the date of McGann's editorial, librarians already had a significant history of using computing in their work in a variety of ways—for automation of tasks related to inventory, cataloging, information search and retrieval, and more.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, there was a body of professional library literature related to the creation and operation of digital libraries and a membership organization for libraries invested in such work (the nascent Digital Library Federation).<sup>33</sup> What then was the source of McGann's concern? He explained: "Many, perhaps most, of those people are smart, hardworking, and literate. Their digital skills and scholarship are often outstanding. Few, however, have a strong grasp of the theory of texts."<sup>34</sup> From McGann's perspective, what was missing from the digital work of librarians was a conversance with, if not a mastery of, a body of specialized knowledge—concepts, theory, method—developed in humanities disciplines about the preservation and transmission of recorded culture. "It has been decades since library schools in this country required courses in the history of the book," McGann observed, but, at the same time, English departments have developed their "own ignorance of the history of language or the sociology of texts." McGann attributes this to academic fashion but, at least in librarianship, the roots go deeper—to the occlusion of a larger conceptual space for humanism in the field.

This is a long way from questions that might seem timelier in considering how librarians can engage the digital humanities. However, the supposedly timely questions—like "Should every library have a digital humanities center?"—no matter the seeming exigency of acting decisively in some tactical moment of opportunity—are, especially now, a waste of our collective time. Instead, as Shannon Mattern has argued, "We need to ensure that we have a strong epistemological framework—a narrative that explains how the library promotes learning and stewards knowledge—so that everything hangs together, so there's some institutional coherence."<sup>35</sup>

The goal of this chapter has been to attempt to justify digital humanities research as core to the theory and practice of librarianship in its own intellectual terms rather than as a useful lever in some temporary tactical maneuver. Digital humanities in the library can be more than a service opportunity; it can be more than an occasion to renegotiate professional status and prerogatives: digital humanities in the library can and should be a source of ideas.

## NOTES

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- 2 *Ibid.*, 415.
- 3 Michael J. Furlough, “Some Institutional Challenges to Supporting DH in the Library,” *Mike Furlough* (blog), August 15, 2012, [www.mikefurlough.net/?p=51](http://www.mikefurlough.net/?p=51).
- 4 See, for example, Michael K. Buckland, “Five Grand Challenges for Library Research,” *Library Trends* 51, No. 4 (Spring 2003): 675–86.
- 5 ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, “Top Trends in Academic Libraries: A Review of the Trends and Issues Affecting Academic Libraries in Higher Education,” *College and Research Libraries News* 75, No. 6 (June 1, 2014): 294–302.
- 6 In direct contrast to this is the concept of “New Librarianship” of which R. David Lankes states that “the mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities.” R. David Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
- 7 Roxanne Shirazi, “Reproducing the Academy: Librarians and the Question of Service in the Digital Humanities” (presentation at American Library Association Conference, Las Vegas, NV, 2014), <http://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities>.
- 8 Alan Liu, “Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/20>.
- 9 Wayne A. Wiegand, “The Development of Librarianship in the United States,” *Libraries & Culture* 24, No. 1 (January 1, 1989): 99–109. See also Wayne A. Wiegand, “Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots: What the Past Tells Us About the Present; Reflections on the Twentieth-Century History of American Librarianship,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 69, No. 1 (January 1, 1999): 1–32.
- 10 Wiegand, “The Development of Librarianship in the United States,” 102.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 100–102. See also Thomas Augst, “Faith in Reading: Public Libraries, Liberalism, and the Civil Religion,” in *Institutions of Reading: The Social Life of Libraries in the United States*, ed. Thomas Augst and Kenneth E. Carpenter

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- 12 Wiegand, "The Development of Librarianship in the United States," 103.
- 13 Christine Pawley, "Hegemony's Handmaid? The Library and Information Studies Curriculum from a Class Perspective," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 68, No. 2 (April 1, 1998): 123–44.
- 14 Michael H. Harris, "The Dialectic of Defeat: Antimonies in Research in Library and Information Science," *Library Trends* 34, No. 3 (Winter 1986): 515–31. Also Pawley, "Hegemony's Handmaid?," 135–36.
- 15 Harris, "The Dialectic of Defeat," 516.
- 16 Douglas Waples, "The Graduate Library School at Chicago," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 1, No. 1 (January 1, 1931): 26–36.
- 17 J. L. Rudolph, "Epistemology for the Masses: The Origins of 'The Scientific Method' in American Schools," *History of Education Quarterly* 45, No. 3 (2005): 341–76.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 344–47.
- 19 John Dewey, *The Sources of a Science of Education* (New York: H. Liveright, 1929).
- 20 Waples, "The Graduate Library School at Chicago," 30.
- 21 C. Seymour Thompson, "Do We Want a Library Science?," *Library Journal* 56, No. 13 (July 1931): 581–87.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 582.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, 583.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 582.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 583.
- 27 Matthew Arnold and Stefan Collini, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 28 John V. Richardson, *The Spirit of Inquiry: The Graduate Library School at Chicago, 1921–51* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1982): 90.
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- 30 Jerome J. McGann, "Literary Scholarship in the Digital Future," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, No. 16 (December 13, 2002): B7.
- 31 *Ibid.*

- 32 W. Boyd Rayward, "A History of Computer Applications in Libraries: Prolegomena," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*, 24(2) (2002): 4–15.
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- 34 McGann, "Literary Scholarship in the Digital Future."
- 35 Shannon Mattern, "Library as Infrastructure," *Places Journal* (June 2014), <https://placesjournal.org/article/library-as-infrastructure>.