

A partnership between the library and the digital humanities scholars: interview with Plamen Miltenoff



Interviewed by Anna Maria Tamaro
Digital Library Perspectives

Plamen Miltenoff is the Scholarly Communication Librarian at University of Minnesota Duluth. He has an international background with studies in Bulgaria, the former Soviet Union, Austria and the USA and with practical experience and theoretical research in the digital library context both in Europe and in the USA. His latest research, publications and presentations focus on immersive teaching and learning, online interaction between teachers and students in the hybrid classroom and social media for institutional use.

As a privileged witness of the digital transformation of libraries, we asked him for his opinion on the impact of the partnership between the Library and the Digital Humanities scholars for digital library services and tools.

Q1: What resources, services and what tools do you make available to facilitate the digital transformation?

The digital transformation initiative is one of the European Parliament's priorities. The push for Open Science is very well reflected in the countries of the European Union, and the US federal government only in the last year is aiming to build a centralized strategic approach in this direction.

In that sense, the changes in the digital world, equated to the EU "digital transformation," are more sporadic. There are projects on the national level, such as the National Digital Newspaper Program [1], a partnership between the Library of Congress and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Another such endeavor is the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) [2]:

The Digital Public Library of America amplifies the value of libraries and cultural organizations as Americans' most trusted sources of shared knowledge. We do this by collaborating with partners to accelerate innovative tools and ideas that empower and equip libraries to make information more accessible.

Large and financially able educational and cultural institutions, such as the ones participating in the Ivy + or Big Ten Academic Alliance are able to provide the resources and services needed and less fortunate ones are falling behind. At state level, the Minnesota Digital Library [3], the California Digital Library [4], the Texas Digital Library [5] are some examples.



However, the USA is failing to remain a leader in such transformation, and digital models are appropriated by China and similar “authoritarian-minded actors,” subverting civil liberties such as the rights to privacy and free expression (Runde *et al.*, 2021). Concerns about data privacy, surveillance and espionage focused efforts in specific directions, which inevitably lowers the attention to other areas, such as Digital Humanities.

Some of the tools habitually expected by digital scholarship librarians are GIS, mapping and timeliness tools such as the Esri’s suits [6]; tools or text mining and analysis such as R [7] and Python [8]; data visualization tools such as Tableau [9]; and digital storytelling tools such as Omeka [10] and Scalar.

Content Management Systems platforms like WordPress, Drupal and Joomla provide a framework for creating and managing websites and digital content. They offer features for content creation, editing, publishing and organizing, making it easier for librarians and researchers to maintain an online presence.

Q2: How does the digital library facilitate today’s digital scholarship? How do you foresee the digital library will facilitate digital scholarship in five years?

Libraries in the USA adopt various strategies to support researchers and students in their digital efforts.

An increasing number of libraries allocate finances for digital scholarship librarians and/or digital humanities librarians. Whether under those titles and/or as part of the responsibilities of librarians with other titles, the US libraries initiate and maintain a rapidly increasing number of digital collections. They digitize their collections of books, manuscripts, photos, audio/visuals and other nontextual materials and make them accessible and searchable online [11].

The libraries increasingly take the lead in open access initiatives to make scholarly publications more accessible. Libraries are usually the engine for institutional repositories, where researchers and students’ output is stored, along with research data and other institutional documents and artifacts. For example, the University of Minnesota system provides all five campuses with a repository [12] and data repository [13].

The work with these repositories is an example for institutional partnership, since each of the campuses from the University of Minnesota system are separate units, but they share the repository servers, as one example of numerous other tools for digital transformation. Such cross-institutional collaboration also goes on different other levels among educational and other institutions, such as cultural heritage ones.

Scholarship Communication librarians and similar library positions with responsibilities for Digital Humanities are actively participating in digital scholarship projects including the grant proposals for such projects, guiding on writing data management plans, offering resources to help researchers meet funding agency requirements related to open access and data sharing.

Libraries organize, facilitate and often lead workshops, webinars, instructional and training sessions on established and upcoming digital tools and methodologies. These initiatives assist researchers with developing skills in areas of data analysis, coding, digital publishing and research and data management. Such initiatives enable scholars to effectively leverage digital technologies.

Libraries actively collaborate with researchers and students, offering consultations on digital scholarship projects. They provide expertise in areas such as data visualization, text mining, digital humanities and scholarly communication. Librarians assist in project planning, resource selection and navigating copyright and intellectual property issues.

To support digital scholarship, libraries invest in technological infrastructure. They provide robust internet connection, computer workstations, software tools and applications and equipment necessary for digital research. Some libraries also build and maintain dedicated

spaces like makerspaces, digital labs or visualization studios that foster collaborative, interdisciplinary and innovative scholarship.

Academic libraries are responsible for the creation and maintenance of the infrastructure for digital scholarship. The curricula in the current iSchools (a name increasingly adopted and replacing the traditional “library and information science” programs and schools) clearly reflects the ambition of the libraries to have their next generation of librarians spearhead the digital transformation in the society.

In the next five years, the librarians will continue to remain the strongest and most vocal supporters not only of the digital transformation, but of the currently neglected but nonetheless important ethical, legal and moral issues accompanying these processes.

Q3: The digital librarian is embedded in the digital humanities community: how are personal and professional relationships with scholars changed?

The role of the digital librarian being embedded in the Digital Humanities community can lead to significant changes in personal and professional relationships with scholars.

Librarians working closely with scholars in the Digital Humanities community can foster collaboration and partnerships. By having a deep understanding of the scholars’ research needs and goals, librarians can provide valuable expertise and support in navigating digital resources, tools and methodologies. This collaboration can result in joint projects, co-authorship or shared resources.

Librarians can serve as a bridge between the library and the scholars, facilitating regular and meaningful communication. This close relationship allows librarians to stay updated on scholars’ research projects, evolving needs and emerging trends in the field. In turn, librarians can provide scholars with tailored information, training and guidance on relevant digital tools, databases and resources.

Librarians embedded in the Digital Humanities community can provide customized services and support to scholars. They can offer specialized training workshops, one-on-one consultations and assistance in data management, text mining, data visualization or other digital research methodologies. This personalized support helps scholars make the most of digital resources and technologies for their research.

Librarians can collaborate with scholars in designing, developing and implementing digital research projects, including the creation of digital archives, online exhibits or interactive digital platforms. This involvement in the research process fosters a deeper understanding of scholars’ work and strengthens their professional relationship.

The embedding of librarians in the Digital Humanities community enhances personal and professional relationships with scholars by promoting collaboration, communication, customized support, co-creation of digital scholarship and advocacy for scholars’ needs. This integration strengthens the partnership between librarians and scholars and contributes to the advancement of digital scholarship.

Q4: Data is important for digital humanities: can the digital librarian be considered a data steward?

The digital scholarship librarian and any other librarian bearing these responsibilities is the data steward *de facto*. Those are the librarians responsible for organizing and managing digital collections, including data sets used in digital humanities research. They ensure that data is properly described, classified and stored to facilitate discovery and access.

Librarians in positions like the digital scholarship librarians are involved in preserving and archiving digital materials, including research data. They use strategies to maintain the

integrity and authenticity of data over time, ensuring its long-term availability for future use and analysis.

Digital librarians work to ensure the quality and consistency of data in digital humanities projects. They may establish metadata standards, data documentation practices and data quality control processes to enhance the usability and interoperability of the data.

Librarians are aware of ethical considerations and legal requirements related to data in digital humanities. They help researchers navigate issues such as data privacy, intellectual property rights and compliance with data protection regulations.

Digital scholarship librarians develop strategies for data discovery and access, making data available to researchers, scholars and the broader public. They may create metadata records, develop search interfaces and implement access policies to enable users to find and access relevant datasets.

Librarians collaborate with researchers, scholars and other stakeholders in the digital humanities community. They facilitate data sharing and promote open science principles, ensuring that data and research outputs are appropriately shared, cited and attributed.

By actively engaging in these activities, digital librarians contribute to the effective management and stewardship of data in digital humanities. They play a crucial role in supporting researchers and scholars in their data-driven investigations, preserving valuable digital resources and advancing knowledge in the field.

Plamen Miltenoff

University of Minnesota Duluth, Duluth, Minnesota, USA, and

Anna Maria Tamaro

Department of Information Engineering, University of Parma, Parma, Italy

Notes

1. www.loc.gov/ndnp/
2. <https://dp.la/>
3. <https://mndigital.org/>
4. <https://cdlib.org/>
5. www.tdl.org/
6. www.esri.com/en-us/home
7. www.r-project.org/
8. www.python.org/
9. www.tableau.com/
10. <https://omeka.org/>
11. Link to the digital collections at University of Minnesota, Twin Cities: www.lib.umn.edu/collections#digital
12. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/>
13. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/>

Reference

Runde, D.F., Bandura, R. and Ramanujam, S.R. (2021), "The United States has an opportunity to lead in digital development", CSIS, published March 30, available at: www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-has-opportunity-lead-digital-development (accessed 15 June 2023).