

Manifesto: A Life on the Hyphen: Balancing Identities as Librarians, Scholars, and Digital Practitioners

Hélène Huet <hhuet_at_ufl_dot_edu>, University of Florida
Suzan Alteri <salteri_at_ufl_dot_edu>, University of Florida
Laurie N. Taylor <laurien_at_ufl_dot_edu>, University of Florida

Abstract

The work of digital humanists and librarians is often invisible to the larger communities in which they work, particularly in academia. This opinion essay by three librarian-scholar-digital practitioners explores invisible work and life on the hyphen — between the academy and the library and between the human and the digital. In this essay, we illustrate how librarian-scholar-digital practitioners can feel overworked and underappreciated, working in and with multiple fields and communities who have different and sometimes competing methodologies. Through two examples, we look at how living on the hyphen takes its toll for librarian-scholar-digital practitioners. We end our essay by detailing steps faculty and administration can take to help us solve the problem and realize the promise of digital humanities.

We are full-time librarians, fully-fledged scholars and digital humanists. As such, we split our work between different yet often intersecting areas. We answer to the distinct professional worlds of the academy and the library, the human and the digital. Or, to borrow the phrase of scholar Gustavo Pérez Firmat, we live on the hyphen. As hyphenated scholars, much of our work is invisible to either (or both) professional worlds. 1

Our situation is not unique. Many digital humanists constantly experience the difficulties of having to perform interdisciplinary work. As Bethany Nowviskie explains: “In a field whose native interdisciplinarity verges on inter-professionalism, full-time, long-term digital humanities staff already struggle against the pressure to become jacks of all trades and masters of none.” [Nowviskie 2016] Similarly, in 2012, Matthew Kirschenbaum argued the term digital humanities as *tactical* because “digital humanities emerges as a rare vector for jujitsu, simultaneously serving to position the humanities at the very forefront of certain value-laden agendas [...] while at the same time allowing for various forms of intra-institutional mobility as new courses are approved, new colleagues are hired, new resources are allotted, and old resources are reallocated.” [Kirschenbaum 2012, 415–16] As Roopika Risam notes more recently: “This is the promise of digital humanities: critical, generous digital scholarship that has the potential to cross institutional sectors; to overcome the divides between archive, library, university, and museum; and create networked publics.” [Risam 2019, 142] Our question is *how to realize this promise*. 2

In 2017, the Digital Library Federation launched a working group on labor in digital libraries, and in 2018 they released their research agenda in which they discuss research on digital library labor conditions and suggest projects for further research. Also in 2018, Christina Boyles, Anne Cong-Huyen, Carrie Johnston, Jim McGrath, and Amanda Phillips issued a call to “make forms of digital labor and the agents behind this labor more visible” [Boyles 2018, 693] in their article “Precarious Labor and the Digital Humanities.” We are answering that call by investigating the working conditions of those who live on the hyphen and work as invisible agents of digital labor. As this special issue of *Digital Humanities Quarterly* is also a call for action, we see an opportunity to discuss our experiences and hope they will lead to more recognition from our various communities, as well as spark ideas for improvement and inclusion in other DH communities. 3

We enjoy our hyphenated lives, and our ability to build bridges between and contribute to fields we love. But we also are tired, overworked and underappreciated, in large part because our split professional identities often fit us nowhere, marking a particular kind of intersection that warrants recognition.

4

At the Intersection of Overtaxed and Underevaluated

Like many practitioners of digital humanities, we frequently find our services and insights in high demand because of our combination of skills. We give guest lectures via Skype and speak at other institutions, not just on our scholarly output but also on librarianship, digital practice, and teaching. We provide support ranging from consultation to project management on large-scale digital humanities projects, and we advise colleagues on smaller digital projects, often serving as both project managers and technicians. We also create our own digital humanities projects based on our research and professional responsibilities.

5

And yet, despite demands for these services and insights and consultations, we are aware that many faculty do not position us as scholarly equals, and that we are underserved by the outdated criteria used to evaluate our performance. Our supervisors applaud our scholarship yet nonetheless struggle to view research as a billable aspect of our roles and responsibilities, rather than an extracurricular activity done outside of working hours. And they struggle to justify our extracurricular activities according to the guidelines they use to determine tenure and promotion. This makes the invisibility of our work as consultants, technicians, and digital scholars more apparent.

6

When we do receive credit for our digital research activities, faculty and administrators may fail to understand that our work is necessarily separated between subject-specific research and library research and must therefore be weighted differently. At other times our involvement is neither explicitly librarianship nor explicitly digital humanities scholarship, but still fulfills essential work in the spaces between, causing some of our colleagues to consider us second-class researchers because our work does not fit clearly within one silo or discipline. Suzan Alteri, University of Florida's Curator of the Baldwin Library of Historical Literature, encountered this problem after receiving grant funding to produce an online annotated bibliography. This digital research project combined Alteri's expertise in rare books, book history, and children's literature. While the bibliographic aspect of the project fell under her professional responsibilities, the research required to compile the bibliography and contextualize texts was largely ignored. Having to combine subject research with librarianship makes being a librarian and a digital scholar a real struggle. The invisibility of non-discrete research intensifies the difference from invisible labor to expected presentation, making it acute.

7

Splitting Professional Identities

Living on the hyphen, we are constantly juggling positionings and identities. When someone asks us what our research is about, we struggle to answer. Do we detail all of the work we do: our research in library science, our area specialty, and digital humanities? Or do we only detail research that will be most relevant to the person with whom we are speaking?

8

Dr. Hélène Huet, the University of Florida's European Studies Librarian, is a digital humanist and a specialist in both book history and the French literary movement known as Decadence. Thus, Huet is both a digital practitioner and a digital humanities expert for the community in which she works. On a given day, depending on whether she is talking to librarians, digital humanists, or French and Francophone Studies scholars, she discusses a different area of her current research. Her example highlights one of the issues we are facing. Indeed, while we love our multi-faceted professional identities, we sometimes think we are losing our identity, and that by participating across so many different fields, we are alien to all of them.

9

Living on the hyphen takes its toll, as we spread our inadequate research time too thin or fail to adequately demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of our work as scholars and professionals.

10

Realizing the Promise

Faculty and administration can take several positive steps toward realizing Risam's promise and helping us solve the

11

problem.

First, we must all take responsibility for making all aspects of our work visible to others. Therefore, at your next conference presentation, please talk about how you completed your digital humanities project, what tools you used, what decisions you made, who your collaborators were, and how your community and working conditions made it possible. Encourage other presenters to focus on the methodological aspects of the collaboration, as well as the results. Open up calls for papers to include not just scholarly and theoretical concerns, but practical concerns as well. Encourage practitioners and scholars to see each other as equals. This is a call for all of us to be generous, generative, and inclusive.

12

Second, departments and programs need to revise their tenure and promotion standards to ensure that hyphenated scholars — individuals who increasingly represent the norm within academia — are recognized for their work. This requires reflecting on the origins of the term hyphenated, and is indicative of a change to better support our colleagues of color and colleagues from different cultural backgrounds who face additional demands from hyphenated identities and systematic oppression.

13

Finally, we all need to push for a cultural change that includes all people involved in academic work thus making visible the invisible work of those on the hyphen, including but not limited to librarians-scholars-digital practitioners. Achieving this cultural change within and alongside other communities pushing for recognition of labor conditions and labor communities only makes sense. Alone, our work is rendered invisible, but working collectively towards changing the daily practices of academia can make the full scope, impact, and import of our work visible. In doing so, we might make visible understandings of work that are appreciative, compassionate, and connected.

14

Works Cited

- Boyles 2018** Boyles, C.; Cong-Huyen, A.; Johnston, C.; McGrath, J. and Phillips, A. "Precarious Labor and the Digital Humanities." *American Quarterly* 70.3 (2018): 693-700.
- Kirschenbaum 2012** Kirschenbaum, M. "Digital Humanities As/Is a Tactical Term." In M. K. Gold (ed), *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (2012), pp. 415-28.
- Nowviskie 2016** Nowviskie, B. "Resistance in the Materials." In M. K. Gold and L. F. Klein (eds), *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (2016). <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/66>
- Pérez Firmat 1994** Pérez Firmat, G. "Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way" In *Bulletin for Biblical Research* University of Texas Press, Austin, TX (1994).
- Risam 2019** Risam, R. *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy*. Northeastern University Press, Evanston, IL (2019).
- Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries 2018** "Research Agenda: Valuing Labor in Digital Libraries." Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries. Digital Library Federation. (2018). https://wiki.diglib.org/images/d/d0/DLF_ValuingLabor_ResearchAgenda_2018.pdf