

What We Read while Looking Up from the Book: A Review of *The Routledge Companion to Libraries, Archives, and the Digital Humanities*

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DOI: pending

Abstract

This review of *The Routledge Companion to Libraries, Archives, and the Digital Humanities*, edited by Isabel Galina Russell and Glen Layne-Worthey, highlights the book's acute representation of the work performed by librarians, archivists and digital humanists. By means of the thoughtful selection and organization of more than thirty chapters, the editors show that libraries and archives are spaces that function because of the relations between five different systems: ethical-ideological, methodological, public, epistemological, and social. The review summarises each one of these systems and explains how they interact to showcase the complexities of academic practices such as digital preservation, digitisation, and text mining.

Introduction

Roland Barthes [Barthes 1986, 29] asks whether we have ever paused while reading a book — not because its content fails to interest us, but because it has absorbed our attention so fully that we keep reading even after lifting our gaze. As a true structuralist, Barthes reflects on the text in his hands as well as on the one he writes in his mind while looking away. Yet this is not all that happens when our eyes wander from the page; we also notice the place of our reading, whose material, digital, and social conditions shape our encounter with the text in ways that usually go unnoticed. Suddenly, elements such as architecture, connectivity, and the presence of others reveal themselves as constitutive of an experience enabled by the relations among systems that, perhaps nowhere more than in libraries and archives, are so intricate and complex. *The Routledge Companion to Libraries, Archives, and the Digital Humanities*,^[1] edited by Isabel Galina Russell and Glen Layne-Worthey, offers a gateway into such multifaceted interactions.

Through two separate introductions (one for the series and another for the volume itself), and thirty-three chapters with fifty-two figures organized into five sections, *The Companion* gathers a wealth of contributions by authors with diverse professional backgrounds — digital humanists, archivists, librarians, computing specialists, and many others. Because the book mirrors the complexity of its subjects and objects of study not only in content but also in form, it is reasonable to imagine that its compilation was not unlike the kind of work carried out in libraries and archives to organize the collections they house. In their introduction, the editors note that the arrangement of chapters could easily have taken other shapes, given the many overlapping themes within the book, such as “digital preservation, questions of labour and equity, ‘national libraries’ as a particular and very special category of institution” [Galina Russell and Layne-Worthey 2025, 24]. In other words, the editors provide a panoramic view of a vast landscape — one for which this review proposes a map to help navigate the various physical, digital, and institutional spaces represented in *The Companion*.

To begin with, it is necessary to recognize that, broadly speaking, libraries and archives are entities where information is stored, organized, and made accessible. Framed in such terms, their mission might seem straightforward; yet if we think of information not as “a thing, but the operation of a thing that enters a system and produces a transformation within it,”^[2] [Hui 2022, 197] then its preservation, organization, and access emerge as highly dynamic practices, requiring

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constant adjustment and negotiation. Understanding information as a “difference that makes a difference” [Hui 2022, 206] allows us to appreciate its importance in the relationships among libraries, archives, and the digital humanities. In *The Companion*, information — “which is neither energy nor matter” [Hui 2022, 216] — transforms these relationships through five interlocking systems. Each of the volume’s five sections constitute a kind of system underpinning what the editors view as two “deeply intertwined, productively interdependent, and mutually reinforcing” fields: “DH, on the one hand, and the library, archival, and information sciences, on the other” [Galina Russell and Layne-Worthey 2025, 2].

Systems within the Fields

The first of these is the ethical-ideological system, in which the effects of information become evident in the necessary revisions to the very conception of national libraries, whose purpose is to gather the entirety of a nation’s cultural heritage. In practice, however, this goal must be rethought considering a material reality that, as Galina Russell notes [Galina Russell 2025, 19], is inherently incomplete. Such incompleteness is further complicated by digital technology, which seems to offer a path toward totality only to reveal an abyss of lost fragments. Often, these fragments are not even located in their places of origin — a condition Avilés calls “bibliographic diaspora,” describing books and collections displaced from the contexts in which they were created [Avilés 2025, 31]. The reasons for such displacement can themselves be theorized as new information entering a system and producing difference — as in the case of “rapid-response digital humanities,” defined by Dombrowski et al. as “projects [that] are quickly deployed scholarly interventions in pressing political, social, and cultural crises” [Dombrowski et al. 2025, 45]. In such cases, the involvement of librarians, archivists, and digital humanists becomes an ethical act, insofar as their goal is to preserve cultural heritage at risk of disappearance.

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Ethics take on another dimension when dealing with archival materials under copyright protection. Because legal restrictions limit how such collections may be handled, scholars and practitioners have developed the notion of “transformative uses,” including what Layne-Worthey calls “non-consumptive use” — that is, “research in which computational analysis is performed on one or more Books, but not research in which a researcher reads or displays substantial portions of a Book to understand the intellectual content presented within the Book” [Layne-Worthey 2025, 101]. In this case, the archive becomes a dataset processed digitally to identify meaningful patterns within the collection. Thus, the difference introduced by information through digital humanities practices helps sustain an ethical system that both respects copyright and enables the heuristic use of archives and libraries.

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The second system, methodological in nature, encompasses a broad range of essays linking libraries, archives, and digital humanities. It is perhaps the most robust of the five. Here it is worth recalling the image of a reader who looks up from the text and begins to take note of her surroundings — because she will likely recognize a variety of methods (of selecting, cataloguing, grouping, visualizing, digitizing) that manifest difference, that is, the arrival of information transforming a system. For Woitas, one of the central methodological paradigms of the digital humanities has been the transformation of collections into machine-readable data, with the aim of enabling and promoting “the computational use of their resources” [Kathi Woitas 2025, 143].

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The notion of “collections as data” is central to *The Companion*, largely because for those who work in libraries and archives, the shift from the linguistic to the numerical nature of materials opens the door to methodological practices such as text mining [Gutiérrez De la Torre 2025] and the use of linked open data [Burrows et al. 2025]. The methodological system that interweaves libraries, archives, and digital humanities embodies the two defining traits of information — recursivity and contingency — since its protocols are designed to be both repeatable and responsive to the unexpected.

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The third system, public in character, consists of the channels through which content and research circulate. As Roberts and Miller observe, “in the digital age [...] new tools and platforms have made digital publishing more feasible through lower technical and financial costs” [Roberts and Miller 2025, 219]. Libraries and archives, therefore, can be understood not merely as spaces of preservation and organization but also as agents of dissemination. This shift profoundly alters their relationship with users: libraries and archives are no longer passive repositories but active participants in the

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circulation of knowledge and culture.

Digital access has been especially significant for small and local collections, such as the letters of H. J. C. Peirs analyzed by Lucadamo et al., or Kyoto University's Rare Materials Digital Archive discussed by Nishioka. The intersection of the small and the public also appears in practices derived from the digital humanities, such as the principles of digital longevity and the notion of "minimal computing," which require "collaboration between technologists, scholars, and librarians and archivists *throughout a project's lifecycle*" [Galina Russell and Layne-Worthey 2025, 261]. The goal is to preserve digital work in simple formats that ensure durability. In *The Companion*, the public system linking libraries, archives, and the digital humanities paradoxically gravitates toward simplicity — an adaptive response that transforms the material limitations of digital publishing and preservation into opportunities for innovation.

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The fourth system is epistemological, built upon reflections on the dialogue among academic disciplines. In *The Companion*, not only are the digital humanities situated in relation to academic fields, but librarianship and information science also become subjects of inquiry. Such conversations inevitably produce differences in the guiding principles of each discipline. For instance, digital preservation is often assumed to be a technical matter, yet as Owens argues, it is in fact an epistemological one, since "at the heart of work in digital preservation are questions about what is essential or significant about a given object or creative work, questions about what interfaces and metadata best support access and use of content, and questions about power, context, authority, and control" [Galina Russell and Layne-Worthey 2025, 331]. The relationships among libraries, archives, and the digital humanities must therefore be approached interdisciplinarily.

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According to Rodríguez-Roche [Rodríguez-Roche 2025, 342], the digital humanities intersect with information science to form an "ecosystem" in which theories, methods, values, skills, and professional activities interact. A defining feature of any ecosystem is its capacity for transformation through interaction with others. In academic terms, this is akin to interdisciplinarity, which, as Missingham and Mason explain, provides "sophisticated conceptual tools and frameworks to analyse knowledge systems and develop methodologies leveraging multiple disciplinary perspectives" [Missingham and Mason 2025, 380]. Today, one such tool is artificial intelligence (AI), which has increasingly entered professional domains to address complex problems. Reducindo and Olangué's chapter illustrates how AI contributes to archival work and proposes an implementation framework that begins by viewing the archive as an organization with processes and tasks analogous to those of a business [Reducindo and Olangué 2025, 416]. While that perspective may seem provocative within academia, it underscores the complexity of the epistemological system connecting archives and the digital humanities — one whose reach extends beyond institutions into the marketplace and industry.

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Finally, the fifth system in *The Companion* is social. As Galina Russell and Layne-Worthey note in their introduction, "the digital humanities, perhaps more than other traditional humanistic fields, rely on a variety of formal infrastructures and organisations" [Galina Russell and Layne-Worthey 2025, 11]. Such dependence stems both from the field's close relationship with technology and from its relatively recent institutional emergence, which has required digital humanists to cultivate sophisticated negotiation skills to secure resources and spaces within libraries and archives.

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The chapters illuminating this system offer windows onto the concrete experiences of organizations that manage, support, and direct digital projects housed in libraries around the world, such as Yale University Library, the National Library of France, the National Library of Israel, and the British Library. As with the other four systems discussed here, the social system is marked by the transformations that information introduces — transformations that render institutional negotiations dynamic and contingent, yet internally recursive, allowing libraries and archives to regain equilibrium amid systemic change.

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Conclusion

The Routledge Companion to Libraries, Archives, and the Digital Humanities, edited by Isabel Galina Russell and Glen Layne-Worthey, grants us access to the very systems that make reading possible in the spaces where information is preserved, ordered, and made available. Additional systems would be appropriate for future work in the digital humanities and library, archival, and information sciences. Such systems stem from the very nature of the digital object, which entails at least four distinct dimensions: material, contextual, organic, and symbolic. Ranging from the technical to

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the embodied, and bridging the historical with the aesthetic, additional alternative systems would shed light on the multiple nuances that shape the digital objects inhabiting our libraries and archives. Once we have marveled at their complexity, there remains only to lower our gaze again and, immersed within our system of systems, continue reading the book, the document, or the screen before us.

Notes

[1] From now on, *The Companion*.

[2] The translations from Spanish are mine.

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