Hack, Yack, Stack: Access, Culture, and DH Infrastructure

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Abstract

In an essay exploring the possibilities of "critical infrastructure studies," Alan Liu calls upon scholars to "'see through' the supposed rationality of organizations and their supporting infrastructures to the fact that they are indeed social institutions with all the irrationality that implies." This panel brings together three librarians from different institutional contexts to interrogate DH infrastructure as a primarily social -- and irrational -- formation. If DH infrastructure is "only" what we make of it, how do we consciously, actively shape DH infrastructure to support what DH could be? How do the social formations of DH infrastructure activate -- but also potentially inhibit -- access by scholars, students, and publics? How do certain social formations of institutional DH mask the emotional labor of DH professionals supporting the work of other researchers? And finally, what is the relationship between infrastructure and underlying institutional culture? Can a critically engaged infrastructure overcome or repair a culture that may undermine the values that we want to instill?

Laura Braunstein will explore the challenges of sustaining DH infrastructure without a DH center. Project management, collaboration, outreach, and digital pedagogy take an ad-hoc and at times, rogue presence, connected only by virtual infrastructure. A DH community of practice that exists primarily as a social network can enable serendipitous connections, but it is not sustainable, for scholars, teams, or projects. How can we institutionalize a virtual DH non-center in order to support activities and projects without inhibiting its energy and possibility?

Thomas Padilla will explore assumptions latent in prevailing notions of scalability in the Digital Humanities. The need to qualify DH infrastructure development, web-based projects, and data sources by the extent to which they are scalable or not tends have the effect of either totally disincentivizing participation by cultural heritage organizations or incentivizing in a manner that tends to occlude acts of individual agency and creation. How can we work to develop practices and methods for exposing and according value to a wide range of cultural heritage work? In what ways does exposing agency and according value to intellectual and physical labor a necessary predicate of research integrity in DH?

Amanda Visconti will explore how we might align DH resource investment with explicit personal and intellectual values such as inclusion and open access. Multiple DH centers already define the scope of the DH they support not through some over-generalization (e.g. "we support innovation in humanities via digital scholarship"), but instead through charters envisioning and encouraging a DH that performs what we care about. How do we use the wiggle room at our disposal, small or large, to push our institutions toward supporting a better DH? How can we act on our values through policies that center resources on work strengthening these values?

Panel organization

As the discussion is informed by each speaker's local context, each of the three speakers will give a 5-minute introduction of their background and interests (15 minutes total). Each speaker will then interview the other two speakers with a prepared question (2 questions from each speaker, 6 questions total at 5 minutes each, 30 minutes total). At the last part of the panel, we'll open up the discussion for both Q&A and audience sharing; the panelists will moderate the conversation so that everyone gets a chance to contribute.

The speakers are:

- Laura Braunstein, Digital Humanities Librarian, Dartmouth College
- Thomas Padilla, Humanities Data Curator, University of California Santa Barbara
- Amanda Visconti, Managing Director, Scholars' Lab, University of Virginia Library

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