

“Collaboration Must Be Fundamental or It's Not Going to Work”: an Oral History Conversation between Harold Short and Julianne Nyhan

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Abstract

Harold Short recounts that his interest in Computing and the Humanities goes back to when he was an undergraduate in English and French at a university in the former Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). There, whilst undertaking summer work in the library, he saw first-hand the potential of digital methods. After arriving in London in 1972 he took an Open University degree in mathematics, computing and systems. Among his early influences he identifies the reading he did on matters related to cognitive science whilst undertaking a postgraduate certificated in education. In the UK he worked at the BBC as programmer, systems analyst and then systems manager. In 1988 he moved to King's College London to take up the post of Assistant Director in Computing Services for Humanities and Information Management. One of his first tasks was to work with the Humanities Faculty to develop an undergraduate programme in humanities and computing. The first digital humanities conference he attended was the first joint international conference of ALLC and ACH, held at the University Toronto in 1989, which c. 450 people attended. He reflects on aspects of the institutional shape of the field towards the end of the 1980s, including the key Centres that existed then, the first meeting of the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing (ALLC) and those who were active in it such as Roy Wisbey, Susan Hockey and the late Antonio Zampolli. He gives a detailed discussion of the development of what is now the Department of Digital Humanities in King's College London, both in terms of the administrative and institutional issues involved, as well as the intellectual. He also reflects on some of the most successful collaborations that the Department has been involved in, for example, the AHRC funded Henry III Fine Rolls project, and the conditions and working practices that characterised them. He closes by discussing his impressions about the movement of scholars into and out of the discipline and of the institutional issues that have had an impact on digital humanities centres.

Preamble

Harold Short has an educational background in the Humanities, Mathematics, Computing and Systems, and in consequence, has research interests in the many aspects of digital scholarship. His work aims to improve understanding of the intersection of the arts and humanities with computing. In particular he is interested in any challenges and opportunities this offers, including the dynamics of research publication and the formal data structure required for database and text encoding technologies. His research also focuses on changes in methodologies — as well as the development of new methods. Additionally, he has a keen interest in the ways in which digital humanities may be organised at institutional levels both locally and internationally. More information is available at <http://www.mccarty.org.uk/>. He is Professor of Humanities Computing at King's College London and a Visiting Professor at the University of Western Sydney in the School of Computing, Engineering and Mathematics.

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Throughout this interview Short reflects, both implicitly and explicitly, on the nature of collaboration and the kinds of institutional and disciplinary partnerships and leadership that are needed for digital humanities research to flourish. He alludes to the importance of digital humanities scholars carrying out excellent scholarship and engaging in partnerships

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with equally excellent, and indeed, intellectually curious humanities scholars. This is, of course, widely recognised. Equally important, though much less explored and discussed is the importance of the “behind the scenes” work, such as the administrative, strategic and research-management work that he discusses at length in this interview. This multifaceted work was carried out at an institutional level, in discussions with, inter alia, Deans and Provosts about mergers, budgets and institutional identity, as evidenced by his discussion of the various stages that the now Department of Digital Humanities, Kings College London, went through, from a support unit to a fully-fledged academic department. It involved generous, painstaking and time consuming work with brilliant scholars, some of whom who did not initially understand computing and its potential, as evidenced by his discussion of the Henry III Fine Rolls project. So too it required the determination to clearly articulate the nature of digital humanities research, as he stated “if you know me you'll know that has been an important part of my thinking all along, the crucial thing from the very outset is that we were not a service, we didn't have a service role in our projects, we only took on projects if it was as equal partners. ... [M]y understanding — it remains now, is that in real research in the digital humanities research projects, ... digital research [is] going on alongside the humanities research and the two have to be put together, and so, [if] someone wanted a database built, we'll say ‘well, the Computing Services Department can do that for you’ ... collaboration has got to be fundamental or it's not gonna work. Everybody has got to understand that the other person has something to contribute.” This administrative, strategic and research management strand of the history of digital humanities offers many interesting research questions that remain largely uninvestigated.

Click for the accompanying audio interview.

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Interview

Julianne Nyhan	So, Harold, can you please tell me about how it was that you first got involved with the idea of using the computer in the humanities?
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Harold Short	That actually goes back to my undergraduate career, which was in French and English. This was at university in Central Africa, in the country that is now Zimbabwe. I was interested in computing and I actually did vacation work in the library and started to see some of the potential for digital methods in information management and retrieval. So, when I came to leave Zimbabwe in 1971, [or] Rhodesia as it was [known then], and took the move to the United Kingdom [arriving in 1972], I already knew that I wanted to change career and do something in information technology. And so I had a series of jobs in information technology and at the same time did an Open University degree in Mathematics, Computing and Systems. I worked for International Computers and then for the British Broadcasting Corporation. I used to have fun telling people who asked me that I wrote programmes for the BBC, and if I was lucky they would say, “oh, which ones?” and I would say, “well, they're ones with very low viewing figures.” And then I saw — I'd been with the BBC eleven years, I wasn't particularly desperate to leave — but I saw a job advertised at King's College London that combined computing and humanities. So, I applied and at the time, it seems a bit quaint now, but King's required not only two professional referees but a personal referee. As my personal referee I named someone I had been in university with in Rhodesia, he and his wife had travelled over with me and my ex-wife on a boat from Cape Town to Lisbon, and he phoned me in great excitement when he received the documents about the job and he said: “This is the job you described to us on the boat coming over!” So, it had been a long standing idea that I've had and I'd kind of been looking for a chance to bring my computing experience back into the humanities. That's the origin of my interest in the two being together.
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Nyhan	And this idea that you'd already started to sketch out on the boat coming over, this sort of intersection, what do you think influenced you and what were your models in this?
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Short

I suppose there had been partly just general reading and things that were in the news and so on. But I think, probably also the work in the library because some of the librarians there were starting to think about digitisation, what it would mean, and although their focus obviously was particularly on record management, nevertheless, it was in the air in a sense. But then, I think probably the more fundamental thing was the year I spent doing a postgraduate certificate in education, because a lot of the literature that we were reading there involved...it was in one sense early days for the kind of cognitive science that is now very common, and so, looking at thinking about how the brain works in relation to how computers might work, and so on, was all part of the zeitgeist. And so, if I had to pick one particular influence, it would be some of the reading I did as part of that education programme.

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Nyhan

When you made this move from the BBC to King's, can you remember the things that especially struck you about the differences between the two environments that you were working in, for example, the perception of the computer — was there a noticeable difference between those two sectors?

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Short

In one sense that's a difficult question to answer because in the BBC I was first a programmer, then a systems analyst, then a systems manager, and so the context was one in which there were very specific organisational issues and in particular, I worked for BBC engineering, which for historical reasons was where the capital budget of the BBC resided, and so I was mainly working with financial systems. The one exception was a big project I was involved in for the BBC transmitters. [It involved] talking and looking at integrating data from all the different transmitting stations as part of their process of starting to automate more and more of the transmitting stations — they had previously all been manned, but more and more they were becoming automated. So, there were very specific organisational or technical issues being addressed in my work in the BBC, but at the same time, any large administrative system has a lot of human components, and so as a systems analyst if you're going to do a good job, you have to take account of people's behaviour, expectations, training — all sorts of issues.

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There's one other thing I'll come back to in a second, but let me say first of all, when I got to King's, of course, there had been a long tradition of the use of computers in the humanities, this was at King's going back to the late sixties, early seventies. A man called Roy Wisbey, who was one of the pioneers of European humanities computing, he'd been at Cambridge before he came to King's as Professor of German, and at Cambridge he had started something called the Centre for Literary and Linguistic Computing, which, I think it may just about no longer exist now, but it had a long history. And so it was mainly to do with concordances and that kind of thing, typical of the early days of humanities computing, but nevertheless, it meant that there was already this long tradition by the time I got to King's in '88, there was already nearly twenty years' tradition of using computers in humanities research. In fact, one of the reasons for the job that I applied for was that Roy Wisbey happened to be a Vice Principal in 1986, when they were discussing a merger of Chelsea College of Art, Queen Elizabeth College and King's. Queen Elizabeth College actually had started as King's College for Women, it was the women's part of King's College and then it had become independent in the way that a lot of University of London colleges did. And then in the late eighties and nineties it was all the opposite direction, they were all merging. Anyway, as part of this merger, Roy Wisbey as a Vice Principal ensured that one of the reconstituted computing services groups had a role [in] supporting humanities, so the job I applied for was an Assistant Director in the Computing Services for

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So, it was a very different environment, because the idea was to try and develop one specific task. One of my first specific tasks was to work with the Humanities Faculty to develop an undergraduate programme in humanities and computing. They were looking to us to do that because when they had approached the Computer Science Department, I have to say at that stage, King's has a very good Computer Science Department these days, but at that stage it was so bad that it was in danger of being disaccredited by the British Computer Society. So, it was that bad. But they were responsive in-, "we have programming courses, so just send your students on our existing courses," so no concept of any kind of issues that arise when you bring humanities and technology together. So that was one challenge, and then the other was picking up the pieces, picking up the pieces is the wrong phrase, because that implies there was a problem, building on the work that had already been going on, in terms of looking at new ways to use computers, beyond the more traditional, by that stage traditional activities of concordancing and that kind of thing. In a sense, it was almost a blank sheet but with a basis to build on, and that was really interesting and a great challenge to be faced with. A huge part of what I was facing when I arrived at King's was looking at ways to approach and interact with humanities scholars and fortunately, King's is one of the places in the UK, where humanities has always been of particular excellence, it has always been, along with UCL and Oxford and Cambridge, one of the top four or five humanities institutions in Research Assessment Exercises and that kind of thing. And so it meant that you were actually working with excellent scholars. This is probably getting ahead of the conversation a little bit but when I'm asked about why the department was so successful in generating research income, one of the key factors, I always say, is working with excellent scholars, because if one of the world's leading medieval historians has their name at the top of your proposal, and it involves digital methods, they don't ask the same sort of questions as if it's a historian they've never heard of who is proposing to use some new-fangled methods that they don't know about. I would say that's the key difference, from moving from very constrained and highly specified type of tasks, task group, to a much more open, as you would expect in a university environment. What was the aside that I was going to mention?

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Nyhan

Yeah, something you were going to come back to. You were talking about Roy and you said you would just come back to it.

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Short

It's gone, ...

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Nyhan

Yeah, you'll probably think of it when you don't think about it for a moment.

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Yeah.

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Nyhan

When you think back, you said it was '88 you joined, so how did the field in general look, or the idea of a field, in 1988?

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Short

As it turned out it was a wonderful moment to start a career in Digital Humanities, because '89 was the first joint international conference of ALLC and ACH, and it was the University Toronto and there were 450 people there, there was a week of workshops before and a week of workshops afterwards. So I was very lucky in that two of the key members of the team that I inherited were already very engaged and already knew quite a lot about what was going on. One was an archaeologist and one, her partner, was a remarkable fellow,

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who was, well she was remarkable, but her partner was equally remarkable. He had a first degree in physics and a masters in computer science and was just in the process of doing a part-time degree at Birkbeck in Classics, when I first met him. So the two of them were already reading the journals and they were able to point me in some really good directions and they're the ones who said more or less within a week of my arriving: "If there's one thing you do this year, you must go to this conference in Toronto, because you'll find out what's going on in the field." So, the week before the conference they have these workshops and then this rich conference, absolutely amazing, and of course as an introduction to the field it was wonderful. That doesn't really answer your question about what the field looked like.

Nyhan

That's an indication, because I had just wondered, was King's this-, as we try to think back and imagine what we don't know, I had just wondered, was King's this bastion in Europe, or how did it intersect?

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Short

No. I don't think anyone would have described it as that. It was one of the places. In the UK, there was Oxford, Cambridge, and King's, were the three places where there were humanities computing activities going [on]. At the stage I would have thought Oxford would have been thought of as the leading institution, Susan Hockey was there, and she was very involved in the Associations and so on. But there were also a number of European institutions, including some in France and Germany that then kind of disappeared from the scene within a few years. The meeting of ALLC happened to have been at King's because Roy Wisbey was there, it could equally have been at Oxford. I think it was at King's because it's easier for people to get to, but it was very European from the outset. Roy was elected the first chair. I think Susan might have been the first secretary, although I'm not absolutely certain but of course she later became chair and was chair for 13 years. And then Antonio Zampolli, the late Antonio Zampolli, was elected president. But I think the fact that the founding meeting was at King's was just an indication that King's was one of the places, not because it was seen as the leading institution by any means.

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Nyhan

And it was 450 people attending?

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Short

That's the Toronto conference and Toronto was certainly one of the places that people thought of being, as Willard McCarty was there then. And he was just establishing his presence if you like, *Humanist* was a few years old and the Centre for Computing Humanities at Toronto was seen as probably the leading institution in the world at that time.

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Nyhan

Can I ask, I'm not entirely sure how many years I'm skipping forward, but you mentioned that when you joined that it was a computing services department, and now CCH is a — and there is an even more modern name, I think...

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Short

Department of Digital Humanities.

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Nyhan

The department and it's been a department for a number of years.

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Short

Since 2002.

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Nyhan

Could you talk a little bit about that transition from a support role to a department?

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Yeah, sure. There are a number of factors involved, maybe let me tell you the sequence first of all and then we can talk about factors if you like. So '88 was when we started, by '92 it was clear that there were some substantial research projects ready to move forward, and actually starting, and so we got agreement from the — I'll call it the School of Humanities, it had a slightly different name at that time, but that's what it was. It agreed to fund one post and the computing centre agreed to one of my team's posts being dedicated to something we called the Research Unit in Humanities Computing. The crucial significance of that from my perspective was that both the school and the computing centre agreed to dedicate a post. And for the School of Humanities that was new money, a new post. That was sufficiently successful that by '95, so this was '92, by '95, it was clear that we needed additional focus, and additional resources and capacity for developing research projects with the School of Humanities, with the scholars in the school of humanities. So, the expansion is what led to the change of name from Research Unit in Humanities Computing to Centre for Computing in the Humanities. Then from '95 on that was how we were. In 2001, a new director-, oh sorry, one thing to mention in that period between '95 and 2000, one of the things that I got very involved in, as Assistant Director of computing services was the merger of computing services with the library into something called Information Services, and just as a footnote, King's College has recently announced that they're going to divide them again. Anyway, that's neither here nor there.

So then there was a new Director of Information Services in the early 2000s, who decided that the Centre for Computing in the Humanities was not a good fit, because of all the academic stuff we were doing, we were teaching undergraduate programmes, we had just announced the development of a master's programme, we were involved in large numbers of, by this stage, large numbers of research projects, and it was clear from the beginning and this, if you know me you'll know that has been an important part of my thinking all along, the crucial thing from the very outset is that we were not a service, we didn't have a service role in our projects, we only took on projects if it was as equal partners. On the principle, my understanding — it remains now, is that in real research in the digital humanities research projects, there is digital research that's going on alongside the humanities research and the two have to be put together, and so, someone wanted a database built, we'll say "well, the Computing Services Department can do that for you" . If they want to talk to us about how to address research questions, then that's where we started. So, I can sympathise in a sense with the attitude of the Director of Information Services, he actually didn't last very long in the role, only a couple of years, but he thought ISD, Information Services, needed to refocus as a service delivery department, and so he saw no role for the Centre of Computing in the Humanities. So that was the stage at which someone who had previously been Head of the School of Humanities and very supportive of the development of, first of all, the Research Unit in Humanities Computing and then the Centre for Computing in the Humanities, a man called Barry Ive, by this stage he was a vice principle, and so he and I had a number of conversations. In fact, I'd heard the news about the IS Director's viewpoint just as I was leaving for a conference in Australia in 2001, and I was somewhat anxious about what the future might hold, but Barry sent me an email saying "don't worry" . We started some substantial discussions and I basically said, "I think this gives us an opportunity." He said, "you know, looking at CCH, you walk like a duck and you quack like a duck so why don't we agree that you're a duck?" That's how he put it.

And so from 2002 we became, in April in 2002, we were formally brought into the School of Humanities as an academic department. We had some discussions at the time about whether to change the name from centre to department and we decided that, we felt we

were just becoming established in the humanities computing frame, as we called it then, as an entity and that it would be, for brand recognition purposes, it would be not necessarily the best move to change the name. In retrospect, I think that that was the wrong decision because even up until the recent name change people still thought centre meant that we weren't department, even within King's, and so names somehow can mean more than they should. So, if we'd changed the name to department in 2002, which is when we became a department, it probably would have been beneficial in the longer term, but anyway, that's history. So that's the sequence. We actually agreed the change of name from CCH to Department of Digital Humanities, DDH, we thought that would be easy for people to remember, in late 2009, early 2010. But as you probably know that there is quite a lot of international attention paid to what was happening in the School of Humanities at King's. Fortunately, all the things that were predicted didn't happen, so, for the most part, so that was, it has all settled down a lot, it just meant that the school had no capacity to really follow through on that at that stage. But then with my retirement and the appointment of a new director, they used that opportunity to announce the change of name to the Department of Digital Humanities. I have a feeling that that sequence only addresses part of the question that you asked.

Nyhan

Well, I think it's a very good start, and as I said, we're definitely going to be back to interview you again. So, in the last, we have a few minutes left, I wanted to go just a small bit more in that direction and ask you to reminisce about the perception traditional scholars had of using the computer in research. So you know, obviously the fact that your mission has been to show that DH is not service indicates that it was often perceived as service and I was wondering if you would discuss that a little bit more?

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Short

I think that perception within King's was not anything like as widespread as elsewhere. Just, it's [a] little bit of an aside, but I think we were helped by the fact that European attitudes in general and UK attitudes specifically about what in North America is the staff-faculty divide, is nothing like as pronounced. So, the fact that we were doing, involved in doing, the technical part of a research project, the technical research within a research project, didn't mean that people automatically assumed we shouldn't be because we were to begin with in the computing services area. So that meant the transition from being first of all almost entirely service oriented and then gradually, as you will have gathered from the chronology, gradually moving more and more into academic work and away from support and service, and then into becoming an academic department. That transition was much easier than I think it would have been in any North American institution that I know, and then it was easier than in some UK institutions that I can think of but I think there the long tradition of humanities computing helped and the fact that the engine for the development were the research projects, and you know, nothing succeeds like success. You start landing big research projects with distinguished international scholars, and then other people want to be on board and they assume that's how it should be done. So if your role with this distinguished professor and that distinguished professor has been as research partners and they valued that, then their colleagues assume that's how it should be. Within King's, we had much less of an issue than we might have done at some other institutions. I come back again to the excellence of the scholars we worked with — I think that was a big big factor. Now, that's only part of what you're asking about, I think.

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One of the things that came to my mind as you asked me that question, and stop me if this is too far away from what you really wanted to know, is that a lot of it came down, as always, to interpersonal relationships and we had the experience over and over again of

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working with a scholar who simply at the outset didn't understand what the potential might be. If I think of one particular [instance], there's a lovely lady called Janet Nelson who is a fellow of the British Academy and who is a former president of the Royal Historical Society, one of the, probably the world's leading historian of Carolingian history. ... I got to know [Professor Nelson] quite well and between the two of us, we kept saying, you know "we think this is a really interesting project that we could do together" and it took several years. But then, once she got engaged with us, she became our biggest supporter within the institution. And just one other anecdote if that's OK, [we worked] with a very distinguished 13th century historian who wanted to develop an edition of the Fine Rolls of Henry the 3rd. If you don't know, a fine at stage was any kind of payment to the king, these days it's a penalty payment. And so, he was told by this other historian I mentioned (Nelson) that he must come and talk to us if he wanted to-, he wanted to do an edition of these fine rolls. She said: "You have to talk to CCH, otherwise you're simply not going get the money, nor will it be worth doing." So he — because she told him that he must do this — he came [to CCH], but it was clear from the outset that he didn't know why we were supposed to be talking. But he went through the motions, he is a lovely fellow, very courteous and polite, he went through the motions and everything was fine as so often is the case until we got to the budget side of things. We got far enough along that we were preparing the proposal and then it became clear that if we were going to have a research role he couldn't have two full time researchers funded for history because at that time the Arts and Humanities Research [Council] (AHRC), well they still do, has a ceiling, so your whole bit had to be under a particular limit. So, then he went back to Professor Nelson and said: "We can't afford this." And she said: "If you think you can't afford it, then you better go and talk to Harold again, because I can tell you, you're not going to get the money if you don't involve some technical research, because there will be something valuable that's needed there." So he came back to see me and he said: "I'm sorry, but you're going have to go through all this again, because I haven't really understood it." So we went through some of the same old things again and he suddenly stopped and said: "So are you telling me that if we develop the kind of resource that you're describing, using the kinds of methods that you're describing, that if I want to find, to retrieve, all those fines in Lincolnshire between 1260 and 1280 that related to the establishment of markets that I will be able to do that?" And I said: "Yes, that's one of the things that you will be able to do." And it was like, you know, that was his Damascene moment — he suddenly started to understand. And now, the AHRC talk about it as one of their flagship projects, and he is delighted with everything that has happened, and it's been a really fruitful collaboration. But it required that kind of, I mean that's a particular example, but it's that kind of negotiation all along the way and it has to be true of any kind of collaborative research, the collaboration has got to be fundamental or it's not gonna work. Everybody has got to understand that the other person has something to contribute.

Nyhan

For certain. Anne, is there anything that you would like to add?

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Anne Welsh

The only thing that struck me was you mentioned way way back at the start of the interview some, I think you said French universities that were involved. I think it was when you were talking about the first conference or just before then and they stopped being involved? That instantly piqued my interest, because one of the things that we're investigating in the other strand of the project is this transience and people moving through the field, so I wondered if you could fill us in a little bit on either them in particular or that idea of transience, people coming in at the early days and going out again?

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Short

To provide a real answer to that I'd really want do some research, cause I think it's something that's really interesting. I can give you my un-researched [view] but it is very impressionistic, I'll say that, and I think it would be interesting to do proper research on that. One of the things that I would do for example, and I have thought about doing this, is go back to the speakers at the Toronto conference and indeed the next two or three conferences and then see what's happened to them, cause they-, many of those people have disappeared from view. I suspect there are two ... key [reasons]: one, that the interests of those particular scholars took different directions, in which they no longer saw that the new computing developments would be of particular interest to them, and of course, if you're a pioneer, unless you are willing to continue to be a pioneer, unless you're willing to live with constant change, then it can become very unsettling. So I'm not attributing this to any individual, cause I don't know enough but I suspect that that's one of the issues. And some of them were quite mature scholars at the time, and so it may just be that they retired ... I think at that stage there was more the atmosphere of what, I've heard someone describe as "boutique research" in a sense that it was an individual doing things that he or she was interested in doing and producing, what John Unsworth has called "first generation resources." So I think that's part of the issue.

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Another is, and I think this is perhaps more relevant to the development of particular centres or whatever, and this could sound like hubris and I don't intend that way, but when I'm asked about, as I mentioned before, when I'm asked about why we were successful in establishing CCH in the way that we did and getting it to a departmental status and so on, in addition to mentioning the excellence of scholars, another thing I mentioned and it's in some way related too, is embeddedness — that by the time the issue came up of whether the information services would keep us or not, the School of Humanities already believed that we were so essential to their future that they wanted us to come in as part of the school. And I know of other institutions and I won't name names, but I know of other institutions where there were very thriving, I will mention Toronto actually, because I think it's an example, and Willard McCarty would be able to tell you in more detail about it, where the centre, there were thriving centres for computing in the humanities, but they weren't embedded, they were appendices to the institution, and so when a new senior administrator came in and he had cuts to make, then where did they look first? They look at the appendices, the appendages, to see who they can dispense with, and if you're not embedded then no one particular group is going to fight for your survival. So I think that's another factor. I'm sure there are other factors, and as I say this is impressionistic rather than properly researched but, for what it's worth ...

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Welsh

No, that's very valuable to us. Particularly the embeddedness factor that you mentioned gives us something to investigate that I certainly hadn't thought of, although I should have because I'm a librarian and I've been a library manager and it's exactly that issue that kills a lot of library services but I hadn't thought about that [at the] high strategic level that you've had from being very senior in the profession, so that's fantastic.

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Nyhan

I think we will leave it there for today.

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Short

OK.

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Nyhan

So thank you so much, that was wonderful.

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