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Information seeking in the Humanities: Physicality and Digitality.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief overview of a research project that is examining the information seeking practices of humanities scholars. The results of this project are being used to develop digital resources to better support these work activities. Initial findings from a recent set of interviews is offered, revealing the importance of physical artefacts in the humanities scholars' research processes and the limitations of digital resources. Finally, further work that is soon to be undertaken is summarised, and it is hoped that after participation in this workshop these ideas will be refined.

Author Keywords

Digital Libraries, Humanities, Information Seeking.

INTRODUCTION

The User-Centred Interactive Search with Digital Libraries (UCIS) project is concerned with the needs and behaviours of humanities scholars both in digital and more traditional information environments. This research will then assist in the development of digital library systems to better support humanities scholars.

Increasingly information is provided electronically, including through digital libraries. This may suit the research practices of the sciences, but may not always be adequate for humanities researchers? Although there is an established tradition of studying information seeking, little of this work has addressed how information seeking fits within the broader information task, such as writing, and how the detailed design of the system interface influences individual behaviour. Understanding the existing nature of humanities scholars' research practices forms the basis of our research.

INTERVIEWS WITH HUMANITIES SCHOLARS

Over the past few months interviews have been conducted with scholars from English, History and Religious Studies departments from London, Cambridge, Bangkok and Sydney. These interviews have discussed scholars' research experiences, in some cases over forty years, and how technologies have been introduced that can facilitate (or hinder) their work, or the work of their students. The themes that have been emerging from these interviews begin to reveal the importance of physical artefacts in their work and some of the benefits and limitations of electronic equivalents and support tools.

This work is on going and initial analysis has revealed some interesting themes that are shaping further studies. Here is an overview of some of the themes extracted so far:

Insights into the positive and negative aspects of the Humanities 'research experience'

Detailed descriptions of their research activities revealed the "Sherlock Holmes" nature of their work; how it develops across the use of many sources and how the 'mystery' is investigated by 'chasing up leads'. Additionally, the depths of engagement experienced during interaction with the actual source materials were described. So for example, hunting down a rare 16th Century book in a second hand shop and slowly leafing through it over the weekend was described as a highly pleasurable, personal experience. This poses a significant design challenge: How can digital resources best support the work of the research 'Sleuth' and how can the experience of doing so be enhanced to facilitate engagement whilst interacting with technology?

The Physical and the Digital (Real and Virtual)

Different experiences in a variety of physical libraries were discussed, and how these research experiences differed to

the use of electronic resources was also explored. We shall be addressing how some of the qualities of the physical browsing activity can be best supported by electronic resources. This is being done by developing, prototyping and testing interfaces that offer additional information to the user in a variety of ways, such as statistics on article use, related material, and similar search pathways through the data.

Space, place and people

The importance of, and problems of, places (libraries, auction houses, book fairs), spaces (e.g. working in particular libraries) and the relationships with other people were also revealing. These findings can be set against electronic resources to see how well they support or hinder these relationships. Do these technologies need to consider ways of incorporating additional communication tools to support research communities?

How resources are assessed

The criteria scholars used to evaluate resources were often implicit. These interviews revealed issues of accuracy and ease of use for both physical and electronic resources. Our prototyped interfaces are exploring ways of expressing, for example, how results are ranked and how the user can interact with the system in order to present the data according to their own preferences.

Embracing technology

Participants discussed how different sorts of technology fitted into their research practices over the last twenty-five years, including first use of email, and more recently the Web and electronic resources.

Problems with technologies old and new

Critiques were offered of microfiche, microfilm, CD Roms as well as library catalogues and Internet search engines. By understanding barriers to previous technological take up in general, improved techniques can be developed to promote these resources to the Humanities research community.

NEXT STEPS

Offering accounts of how humanities scholars work, and the role of physical artefacts in their research endeavours, are important for the future of computing in the Humanities. With a better understanding of their work in context and with how current technologies support or hinder their research practice will help to develop and refine supporting technological tools.

Humanities scholars often require the context and full text of the original documents whereas other disciplines are concerned more with the content, regardless of the structure. However, increasingly humanities scholars are using digital resources as a means of accelerating their information searching habits as well as using digitised artefacts.

The next piece of research will be a case study of humanities PhD students that will shadow them through information gathering tasks, paying particular attention to the shifts between the physical and the digital. For example, from the initial documenting of ideas to the use of digital resources such as the Internet and online library catalogues, to note paper and physical library shelf searching through to writing up and search refining. It is hoped that this will draw up a clearer picture of how well existing practices work and how future digital resources could better compliment the research practices of the humanities scholar. Additionally, we expect to gain a deeper understanding of the “research experience” and of the qualities (and importance) of the physical in their work activities.

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Project Website

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/people/a.blandford/DLUsability/UCIS.html>