

Research Support Services for Modern Languages and Literatures

Columbia University Libraries Local Report

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Introduction

This study seeks to understand the research practices of scholars in the fields of literature in modern languages, culture (including folklore, performance studies, and literary history) and writing studies. In coordination with twelve other institutions of higher education and the Modern Language Association (which sponsored the project), Columbia University Libraries partnered with Ithaka S+R, a not-for-profit educational research and consulting organization, to conduct this research. As part of Ithaka S+R's [Research and Teaching Practices](#) stream of work, we conducted an in-depth, qualitative study of Columbia tenured and tenure-track faculty to learn more about their research interests, methods and outputs, along with their processes of discovering and accessing sources. Our local data was shared with Ithaka S+R and will inform a capstone report synthesizing findings across all institutions participating in the overall study.

This humanities-based research joins the series of other [disciplinary-focused reports](#) that Ithaka S+R has coordinated.¹

We present our findings related to the following topics, in an order that tracks the life-cycle of research: scholars' research focus and methodologies; sources and the search process; and research outputs. Throughout the report we refer to the roles of libraries and library staff in relation to these research practices. We hope Columbia's local findings will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the needs of language and literature scholars on a broad scale while surfacing important issues that can inform how we support our faculty locally. In addition, this study also raises issues that may warrant continued assessment and monitoring as we strive to align our expertise and resources with the needs and priorities of faculty.

Observations & Recommendations

Observations	Recommendations
Scholars come from and employ a range of methodological approaches, using history, historiography, archival, and textual analysis methods. Importantly, they adjust and change approaches and continue to try new things.	Libraries should avoid the use of homogenous "personas" to describe researchers in the fields of languages and literatures, and be attentive to how this methodological diversity will translate into the need for and use of different types of collections, e.g. language and literature scholars who depend heavily on art libraries.
Faculty situate their work in complex information ecosystems that defy overly blunt dichotomies between primary versus secondary sources. In practice, they don't consistently make stark distinctions between primary and secondary sources, but approach the use of research materials in a more integrated manner.	Recognizing that the boundaries between primary and secondary sources are often porous for scholars, libraries should collaborate more internally to remove barriers between organizational units (e.g., the special collections units and general research divisions) that might unintentionally contribute to a fragmented experience for researchers.
Interviewees move fluidly across print and digital sources for purposes of discovery, exploration, and use of sources.	Continued effort is needed to break down silos and address inconsistent discovery experiences as scholars work across print and digital sources. Libraries should recognize when and where our systems, practices, and procedures create and/or reinforce silos between physical and digital, and work towards supporting a more coherent research experience.

¹ This is the second research project to which Columbia Libraries has contributed; the Burke Library at the Union Theological Seminary, which is part of Columbia's campus library system, prepared a [report](#) in 2016 on the research practices of scholars in religion and theology.

Observations

Recommendations

Many of the language and literature scholars are using international archives. Faculty face significant difficulties in discovering, navigating, and using these collections given the wide range of practices and protocols that they encounter. Some scholars we interviewed perceive many of the library restrictions and regulations regarding access to special collections, in the U.S. and abroad, as barriers that inhibit the use of these materials.

Librarians, curators, and archivists at CUL should consider expanded and better coordinated outreach and training on common best practices for using international archives. Such “know before you go” outreach should leverage local expertise, especially of high-interest world areas and subjects. While upholding responsible stewardship of our own distinctive collections, we should be attentive to the variety of audiences using these materials, their needs, and the most effective ways of communicating policies and procedures.

Most faculty in our cohort expressed satisfaction with and confidence in their search and research abilities and were unlikely to dedicate time for training on particular resources or tools. Several needs for support surfaced in our interviews, however, including the management of data (mostly in the context of amassing photos and images of archival sources), handling “information overload,” and clarification of issues related to authors’ rights and the dissemination of research outputs.

Libraries should identify effective means of supporting faculty, likely with personalized, flexible and multi-modal approaches that address high priority needs. For example, libraries could offer personalized consultations on publishing and rights, echoed by documentation, and/or a menu of on-demand workshops. Support of “data management” (perhaps labeled differently for humanities audiences) could focus less on tools and more on concepts and best practices that might have more enduring relevance.

Digital methods did not appear to be widely in use among the faculty we interviewed. Scholars articulated challenges in how non-traditional forms of research outputs are recognized and credited for purposes of promotion and tenure.

More research is warranted to better understand how digital methods are surfacing within languages and literatures research, including any barriers to using such methods that could be mediated, at least to some degree, by library support and expertise. A more nuanced understanding of the use of digital methods will help libraries align their support and services to current and anticipated needs.

Our interviews revealed the strength of relationships that exist between faculty and library staff, including subject specialists, curators and archivists, and how these relationships support faculty success. Likewise, delivery services like Borrow Direct are highly valued.

Libraries should leverage these strong relationships as we continue to deepen and evolve our partnerships with faculty, especially in areas related to scholarly communication, digital scholarship, and new forms of building and accessing collections.

Findings

Scholars' Research Focus and Methodologies

"I think for me what humanities is today is to keep these [multiple] contacts with different fields and voices and not to become a super specialist. Of course we are specialists. I work on a specific time period and with specific questions, but those concrete and punctual questions come also from a variety of inspirations in context with different voices and different fields."

Interdisciplinarity has long been a trend in academic research and the scholars interviewed in this study draw from a range of methods, approaches and cultural contexts in shaping and producing their scholarship. The scholars cited research interests that cross multiple humanities departments and draw from disciplines within the social sciences. In addition to their training in literary and language studies, faculty interviewees have been trained in and employ a wide range of research methodologies including historiography, art history, intellectual history, and cultural studies. An interesting trend is the study of popular culture among several respondents and the pursuit of research for popular audiences, suggesting faculty engagement with public humanities.

Many noted that they continue to work on topics familiar within their respective research areas, but they often take what is familiar and push in new directions and into emerging fields through investigations in archives or secondary studies. While many respondents expressed confidence in their approaches and practices, some expressed a desire to have more methodological training: "I was not trained as a historian, so I would really like to know how historians go into primary source archives and how they organize materials." One scholar expressed a need for flexible approaches to research, stating "I try to readjust, continuously, my methodology. It depends on the questions and on the archive that I'm working on." In general, digital methods are not widely utilized within our interview cohort with the exception of one scholar who applied text mining and other computational approaches for analysis. In general, most scholars work closely with texts, moving fluidly between primary and secondary sources.

As might be expected, the research of language and literature scholars is often global in its reach, a "plural dialog with different ways of thinking, languages, places." This global focus manifests itself in terms of the topics studied, the nature of the sources consulted, and the frameworks employed. A scholar commented, "I think that now the trend is that people are really looking for these kinds of global comparative works. And so I think for graduate students and scholars, you know, there's a real need to train people to think globally and locally [. . .] because if you're going to graduate and [. . .] you want a job, you're going to have to show a project that kind of goes beyond just an author or a nation, right?"

Sources

We observed clear patterns among interviewees with respect to the use of both primary and secondary sources. All of them described heavy use of research materials found in libraries, archives, and freely online, in a wide variety of formats. The study questionnaire was not explicit about format preferences but it is clear from responses that the scholars pragmatically move back and forth between formats as they do their research. While some of the scholars did not distinguish clearly between primary and secondary source research, those who did a significant amount of archival research made such distinctions and emphasized both the opportunities and challenges presented by researching in original and rare materials.

All the faculty interviewed rely very heavily on electronically accessed primary and secondary sources. Some of the later-career scholars noted the dramatic shift from their earlier reliance on print materials (which they noted had been time consuming) to research that relies overwhelmingly on digital formats, and is conducted primarily online. Consistent with previous, pre-digital practice, however, is a reliance on texts as the main objects of analysis. The great majority of interviewees report having to spend a great deal of their research time reading texts of various lengths, genres, and formats. The focus on texts, especially now that they are often more easily accessible (at least in terms of content, via digital versions), plays at least as important role in their research and teaching as it ever has.

While most scholars interviewed work with textual sources, images, graphics, objects, and motion picture content were also significant sources for study. Streaming video was seen as an important development by a faculty member interviewed: "I'm very appreciative of the films that you now have streaming. That makes my life a lot easier." Nonetheless, streaming services with limited functionality are sometimes a barrier to the close analysis of films that faculty members often expect students to do: "When you're teaching film, you want your students to be able to stop, pause, replay, replay, look really carefully at a couple frames. You can't study film without the ability to do that."

Overall, databases accessed through the library (including the library catalog), or on the internet, provide the bulk of the secondary sources and a significant portion of the primary sources used by faculty. Most mention primary source databases provided by the library (by subscription or purchase) as being invaluable resources for their research. Some also make use of open access databases created by other libraries and archives around the world. Many of those resources, while appreciated, are criticized by these scholars for their technological failings or insufficient or flawed content. Most of the interviewees mentioned at least one freely available resource on the internet (other than those created by libraries and archives) that they have used regularly for their research. They have come to rely on these resources as a supplement to what is available through the libraries, but sometimes they also need to use them to access resources that they are not able to get through the libraries, at least for the present time. An example of these online sources mentioned by one interviewee is the "Look Inside" function in Amazon, which often provides partial views and tables of contents of books: "sometimes I will even use Amazon book preview, because I just need to peek into the book,

just to see whether it is useful for me.” Indeed, ebooks were used by most scholars we interviewed for discovery purposes. However, one scholar pointed out that scholarship from the region she studies is mostly not found online and often disappears when published on the internet.

Faculty continue to use print format resources for both primary and secondary texts, particularly rare materials that are not available in digital format. For several scholars, this type of primary resource plays an important role in their research. Particularly for those scholars whose research is more historical, archival research on site (in archives and libraries beyond Columbia University, in the U.S. and abroad), with print materials, continues to be a vital part of their research agenda. In terms of secondary sources, these humanities faculty continue to focus on monographs for both tracing and engaging with scholarly conversations, but they supplement them with wide reading not only in scholarly journals, but also in newspapers and magazines. We noted that several faculty described using popular culture sources (e.g., comics, song lyrics, videos of singing competitions) in their research.

Search Process and Use of Libraries

For many faculty interviewees, the search process is personal and doesn't necessarily reflect a formally trained practice but rather one that has evolved through individual circumstances and that can change given the project needs. Several applied metaphors to the process, describing it as a “hunt” and emphasizing the necessity to have the skill to “sniff” out the appropriate sources. The range of idiosyncratic search processes complements the messy and iterative nature of search itself; one interviewee described the “kind of rhizomatic quality” that arises within a research community that relies on formal database/index searching, the use of individual scholars' online bibliographies, and the informal exchange of sources among scholars.

The research process often begins with a search in Google and/or the local online catalog for library holdings. After identifying relevant works, interviewees often mine the citations and notes of the published works, including print bibliographies. This process then leads to the discovery of other types of documents, including scholarly journal literature and newspapers (both current and historical). Several faculty mentioned using multiple indexing and/or full-text databases, citing JSTOR or the MLA International Bibliography as go-to resources. It is common practice amongst all participants to review the work of previous scholars (see Social Networking and Social Media section below). Reading, processing, reflecting, writing, and further investigation comprise an iterative process that moves toward the final published work.

Archives

It's important for students to learn “how to work in an archive [. . .]; not necessarily to scan and photograph 2,000 images and then not to read them. So when you [go to an archive], plan to

stay; plan to stay as much as you can, to live in that archive or to meet with the people there, to meet with the librarians, because there is a lot—in the interview there is the term of ‘efficiently’—yes, yes. But on the other side you need to lose yourself a little bit.”

Archives were an essential source of primary materials for several of the scholars. They point to numerous methods for the discovery of archival content: secondary sources, iterative online searching including in online catalogs, and knowledge of content built through previous research. Academic social networks also serve as points of discovery, including listservs, conference attendance, conversations with other scholars working on similar research projects and, most important, consultations with archivists.

Scholars described, at length, the many challenges associated with using archives located outside of the United States—a very common practice among our interview cohort. In particular, scholars emphasized that materials held within these archives can be poorly cataloged or uncataloged and, therefore, not easily accessible. The archives themselves can be less well organized and operate less formally than those in the United States. These archives “aren’t necessarily well funded and so they’re short on staff, and so the minute you arrive for what you think is going to be a two-week project, they close.” Another scholar noted that in these archives “you need to devote three times as much time [. . .] as you might in another archive.”

Faculty interviewees referred to practices that help to mediate some of these challenges in using archives, especially those outside the United States. Many stated that a considerable amount of time for preparation was necessary before visiting an archive—in order to identify sources, provide adequate response time if communicating with a foreign archive, and review the archives’ policies and procedures. Several emphasized the role of personal contacts (with local archivists, librarians, and scholars) in learning how to navigate foreign archives. They also indicated the occasional need to rely on networks of colleagues and friends to help them locate and access materials in these locations. Another factor that some mentioned is the importance of the researchers’ status and their being known to archives staff: the more that archivists know the scholars, and the more that they respect them (for whatever reasons), the easier it is to gain access to the archives and to discover and use the materials therein.

Other comments from our scholars referred to practices of work once one is actively using archival collections. The process of close reading each page housed in select boxes of manuscript materials is necessary and often turns up unexpected items that can reshape the topic. Often guess work and serendipity in the research process enables one to stumble onto things. One scholar advises to “stay alert,” and another interviewee shared the advice that if your research is “too efficient and too strategic [. . .] then, I think, you miss a lot of something that you do not know, you do not expect. That [unexpected discovery] is the best part.”

Regulation and organization of archives outside of the U.S. can be idiosyncratic or seemingly arbitrary, and the technology available or permitted in many locations (e.g., the use of personal cameras/phones or scanners for making research copies of materials) can be very limited or even non-existent. Several indicate that these skills and methods have changed little across the

digital divide. In some cases, scholars transcribe or photograph original documents, and then work from those copies when researching and writing up their projects. In many of these archives, “you do everything by pencil. So those kind of archival practices slow down the research considerably if you have to take hand notes. You can’t even use your phone.”

Managing, processing, and storing data was also of concern to respondents. Some scholars have accumulated large numbers of photographs of archival materials but they struggle to organize these in a usable way and are aware of the risk of losing their data to happenstance when not properly backed up. Several of the scholars expressed concern about storing their digital files in either the cloud or using external hard drives. Because of OCR software limitations, they struggle to effectively convert historical handwriting to machine readable text. One still has to spend time with the documents in the archive and “sit there and decipher the handwriting.”

Increasingly digitization projects in archives have produced rich collections for access and discovery without having to travel to an archive, a trend that scholars welcome. Faculty reported frequent use of online full-text sources for discovery and reading. However, all scholars emphasized the importance of visiting archives and “looking at the actual book” instead of solely being dependent on digital surrogates, suggesting a hybrid approach to working with formats of primary source content. These faculty emphasize the evidentiary and interpretive value of the original artifact, whose “watermarks” and manuscript writing (for example) illuminate aspects of texts that might not necessarily be evident in digital editions or surrogates.

Less frequently voiced, but not completely absent, was dissatisfaction with special collections in the United States, particularly with respect to access and use restrictions. In relation to discovery, one scholar pointed to the insufficiency of finding aids—in their granularity and language—to identify the contents of a collection: “it’s been variable whether or not the catalog descriptions exist or if they’re detailed [enough].” This scholar elaborates on that thought:

I think just the basic cataloging of what’s available in a given archive can be very helpful in and of itself. [. . .] But being able to look at say [name of specific archival collection] and knowing before I arrive on site [. . .] what kinds of pieces are included. You know, if I’m looking at drafts, drafts from where and from what and what time?

Scholars acknowledge inconsistencies not only in the quality of finding aids, but also in the level of assistance that individual archivists provide to patrons in discovering material: “every archive is as good as its archivist. So depending on how rigorous they are about maintaining the files, what you see may not be what you get.” This inconsistency extends to the culture of the archives themselves, some of which can have “a culture that is baked in that protects books from people rather than for people.”

Interestingly, another scholar suggested that the established discovery path from secondary sources to primary sources (a method of discovery employed by most scholars interviewed) should be a two-way street, giving examples of art objects in museum webpages with

corresponding bibliographies, as a desired analogous feature for finding aids. Bibliographies of secondary sources that have employed an archival collection should be included in that collection's finding aid—a practice that would be useful for making links between collections and scholarship, furthering the discovery of both.

Discovery, Metadata, and Rights

In addition to these discovery challenges related to special collections, our interviewees referenced other challenges of finding and using databases and circulating physical collections. While the interviewees expressed satisfaction generally with the breadth and depth of the materials that they are able to access physically and digitally, searching across the vast landscape of database content presented its own set of issues. Faculty expressed frustration with many library database interfaces and features such as failed or unexpected Boolean search results, inconsistencies in truncation features, inapplicable relevancy results, results cluttered with book reviews, proxy authentication issues, lack of filters and faceted navigation (including filters for geographic location), lack of ability to download multiple pages, irregular page numbering or lack of it, content fragmentation, and opaque prepackaged search boxes. Beyond the mechanics of these resources there are the questions of how these sources are created and organized for discovery and restrictions placed on access, searching, or analyzing documents contained in commercially leased or sold databases. Scholars emphasized the need “to interrogate the tools and platforms themselves, not just use them passively.” This is particularly true for those scholars who work with large numbers of texts and perform computational analyses of them, in other words, for those who work in some area of the digital humanities

Scholars also shared frustration with metadata and description for primary and secondary material while acknowledging its importance. In several interviews faculty members brought up examples of erroneous descriptive data “indicative of what’s actually not happening,” such as mistaken years of publication. The more challenging issue of classification was pointed out by one scholar who said “categories can be prisons” and by another who said “I see that there are political stakes to those processes. And that some of the language that’s used has sort of quickly become outdated. But it’s the way we’ve categorized things, so we’re sort of trapped in using it to a certain extent.” One interviewee expressed a desire for more transparency in research tools that can often be “black boxes,” wanting to know: “What are the collection practices [of the resource/database]? If there are subject categories, who made them, what’s the history?” Faculty members suggested conversations and collaborations between librarians, scholars and students to explore more transparent and open description practices: “I think that the tool cannot be improved if there is no dialog between the people. So archivists, librarians, curators in the libraries; working with or having meetings or research days with scholars; saying, okay, how would you – for instance, this book; how would you list it.”

One faculty member was particularly vocal about the unfortunate privatization of public domain content and the role of the library in enabling publishers to lock down content. These frustrations

point to the tensions of discovery models offering facile federated searching versus more complex, expert discovery models that could extend into data mining. According to this respondent, librarians should be aware of the lack of transparency in publisher algorithms, inconsistencies in search features across platforms, and digital rights management limitations when licensing content. Faculty respondents also point to supporting open access primary source platforms as much as we support open access for secondary material. Nonetheless, one faculty member poignantly criticized the open access movement as a threat to the commercial value of a scholar's research output.

Navigating Circulating Collections

With regard to access issues for the circulating collection, the interviewees had mixed feelings about the availability of on-site content versus offsite material. Faculty acknowledged the convenience of having off-site material delivered to the Columbia library of their choice, with one scholar stating a preference for that option over visiting the stacks when there isn't an urgent need because then the item will be "sitting at the circulation desk." In contrast, another scholar noted that off-site material presents "challenges and obstacles placed in front of researchers" that you might not have if the material were available on site.

Shelf browsing is widely practiced as a method for discovery (not just to retrieve known items), whether by on-site browsing or using the "virtual shelf browse" feature in Columbia Libraries' online catalog. One scholar said, "I am so grateful that we still have open stacks because I really do think something is lost when you can't stumble upon the books next to the book you are looking for." One scholar mentioned the need to look at runs of periodicals for research purposes, noting that this practice is often more easily managed in print than online: "Sometimes it is harder to find if, for some reason, a journal [volume] can't show up via interlibrary loan or because of the legal restrictions. If there's a special issue of a journal, interlibrary loan can make that very difficult." That same scholar goes on to note that:

"[D]igital document delivery [. . .] has been incredible for the material that's not on [e.g., JSTOR]. . . . for example, you're trying to read everything that was in the [journal name]. So having these bound volumes is great for when you're trying to read the whole thing. But by and large that's not usually something that you do, unless you're doing one of these massive field-wide survey type things. "

This research approach was brought up as a rationale for keeping journals on site, as was the challenge and limitations of requesting multiple volumes of a particular journal through interlibrary loan.

Most interviewees repeatedly stressed their satisfaction with the collections that the Columbia University Libraries have acquired, even if on occasion they don't find the items for which they are looking. Several faculty members mentioned the collaborative efforts of subject specialists and curators in acquiring materials for research needs. Nonetheless a few concerns surfaced in

the interviews: books that become lost from the collection and not replaced, films being under-collected because they lack commercial distribution, and the need to have more systematic outreach to faculty for items that need to be acquired for the collection.

The important role of the library staff in providing services for access and discovery was highlighted throughout the interviews. Faculty members by and large expressed satisfaction with Borrow Direct and Interlibrary Loan. One faculty member said she bought fewer books, pointing to books in her office: “You see there are many, many books from our libraries, from U.S. libraries here, from Borrow Direct, from Interlibrary Loan. I can have an article in two or three days. It’s amazing.” In speaking about the collection, another faculty member said: “I’ve been offered jobs elsewhere but this is a better place for me to do research and access to secondary material is just not an issue, in terms of time or availability.”

A couple of scholars in the study mentioned that online access to more table of contents for print books would be a desirable discovery feature and would make requesting content through the “Scan and Deliver” on-campus document delivery service more efficient, especially for expensive books faculty prefer not to purchase and for when faculty work remotely. This service was widely praised by faculty although suggestions surfaced such as the need to include the notes and bibliographies of corresponding requested chapters in scans. In addition, there was both a desire to have, in the future, a service to deliver books to personal offices and/or have books delivered from other campus libraries to the most locally convenient circulation desk for the researcher.

Research Support Services and Training

In addition to asking about their processes of searching, discovering and accessing collections, the interview guide solicited information about the scholars’ training and the role of librarians and other library staff in supporting their research.

When asked to reflect upon their own training as researchers, self-reliance and professional networks emerged as prominent themes. Scholars expressed confidence in their tactics and credit experience with helping them to understand the lay of the land in both libraries and archives. Most of the interviewees developed research practices as graduate students before the current landscape of the internet and vast digital collections took shape. One scholar noted being “a creature of two worlds,” pre and post-digital; others commented that research methods clearly had to adapt for the digital age. Mentoring surfaced as an important practice in the scholars’ experiences, providing models for research and scholarly writing. Self-training or, as one interviewee phrased it, “learn[ing] by doing” is the best way for one to develop research skills.

Given this trend of self-reliance, it was not surprising to find low levels of interest in training offered by libraries. While the majority of the scholars acknowledged that library-provided training can be useful, especially for learning about new resources and advanced search

features, they were reluctant to capitalize on these opportunities because of competing priorities and an overall lack of time. Few interviewees were interested in training on new tools. They felt that the time to learn would not be worth it and didn't trust the longevity of certain tools. For example, one scholar worked closely with a librarian to learn Zotero but after a short period of time stopped using it. Interestingly, several faculty noted that they still frequent the library but increasingly prefer to have services, such as training, provided directly in their offices where they spend most of their time working. For most of these scholars, reverting back to traditional and proven research methods developed over time seemed most effective.

These attitudes toward training notwithstanding, some scholars acknowledge reaching out either directly to a librarian or through an online reference service for help with specific and basic research questions. Most interviewees reported having established at least some kind of relationship with a librarian in order to have the most profitable use of the library and its resources. Faculty report relying on subject specialists in particular for locating, acquiring, more easily accessing, and understanding better the secondary and primary source collections that exist in and are accessed through the library. Many of the scholars expressed appreciation for the rich print and digital collections held by the library that have benefited their research, and they have an appreciation of the role that subject specialists have played in acquiring this material, both for them and for their colleagues. They also cited the positive roles of librarians in providing instruction to students and highlighting faculty works through events and endeavors in shared faculty-library projects. Referring to library staff, one faculty member said: "the research here couldn't be done without them."

One pattern that emerges from the interviews is an awareness of the challenges posed by information overload, particularly the overwhelming amount of published research. Most expressed a desire to find everything that they can on a particular research topic, and some noted that they could sometimes be unsure whether they had captured everything out there, despite having conducted searches in library catalogs, databases, and commercial search engines. The question of when to stop researching is an important aspect of the process mentioned by several scholars. Because of the large quantity of material that is now so easily available, some stated that much of the relevant material that they do find is skimmed or selectively read in order to proceed most efficiently for their purposes.

In asking about student assistants, one faculty member said: "If I put a student, for instance on that [research] question, at the end of one week I have 200 titles; [. . .] so I do it myself." In talking about training graduate students for research, one faculty member discussed "the idea of when to stop rather than how to start or how to do it." As that scholar says, "I think that much of the blockage, the increased time to finish, the delays" in research spring from "a feeling of a need to do everything" that's exacerbated by the availability of vast amounts of research material. This suggests that library instruction and research assistance should include methods not only for finding material, but also for strategically selecting and evaluating that content.

Research Outputs

“. . . the library is our main sort of distributor. They are the closest to us. They are our biggest partner and ally. So working together toward shared ethical goals in distribution – so we can agree that we want our scholarship to be widely read. We want our scholarship to be produced in high quality material that withstands the test of time, that's being archived properly. We want it to be accessible globally. So can we work together to have common guidelines, common practices?”

Scholars displayed a lively interest in how their own research outputs are disseminated, accessed, and evaluated. Along with this, many showed a more wide-ranging theoretical and practical interest in how research outputs in their field are disseminated and made discoverable and available to themselves and to others. Scholars are plainly aware that research outputs are situated and assessed within a range of contexts worth understanding, contexts both within and outside of the university.

Audience

Many of our interview respondents showed a lively awareness of the difference between writing for a strictly academic audience and writing for a more general reading public. Some tenured professors described themselves as currently engaging in research projects that would result in books written for a general audience. Two of those projects were specified as being for trade presses.

The value of extending the reach of research outputs to a wider audience was a recurring theme among both junior and senior scholars. One senior scholar noted, however, that “public-facing scholarship” counts for very little among the sorts of research outputs that will gain tenure for junior faculty. He continued: “the needle has not moved on public scholarship at all.” While he was not certain that public scholarship should be weighted the same as more traditionally academic research outputs, he did feel that “there should be space made for” public scholarship to be done by faculty who have not yet earned tenure.

The online open-access literary review [Public Books](#) was cited by one scholar as being of value for being simultaneously academic and oriented toward the larger public. Publications of this kind, the scholar continued, “grapple with very important issues” and “often make a very explicit case for the continued relevance of literature in the humanities in a way that peer-reviewed journals do not.” Another scholar expressed the view that “humanities are being across the board devalued right now” within universities, along with the corresponding hope that this trend might be reversed if a wider public comes to recognize and embrace the value of humanistic scholarship.

Genre

Scholars discussed a wide variety of genres in which research outputs can be embodied: books, articles, contributions to conference proceedings, “new media digital technologies,” critical

editions of literary texts, public lectures, museum exhibits, and radio interviews. With the possible exception of critical editions, it seemed that one or more of the scholars had at least some experience of being productive in some of these genres. All eleven scholars were asked about their current or most recent research project. Most of them either specified they were working on books or described projects whose levels of complexity implied the monograph format.

In terms of institutional acknowledgement, and especially for the purposes of tenure review, books were acknowledged to be worth far more than any number of articles. One scholar described a grant-funded educational project using “new media digital technologies.” This was described as involving a “tremendous amount of time” and as becoming “almost immediately obsolescent.”

Two genres were described as being undervalued currently in American universities. One was contributions to conference proceedings. “Outside the United States,” one scholar pointed out, such contributions are assessed as being “very important; because you were part, for instance, of that congress, of that conference.” Another genre, critical editions of literary texts, was described by two scholars as being currently undervalued. “Doing an edition is a gift,” said one of them, a “scholarly gift, and if people didn’t do it, the access would be diminished incredibly.”

Dissemination and Open Access

One scholar pointed out that researchers do not necessarily understand the legalities involved in disseminating their own work. If an article is being published in a for-profit journal, can it also be deposited in an open-access institutional repository? This same scholar pointed out that students are also confused about such issues.

The accessibility of research outputs across national borders was a topic of concern mentioned by two scholars. One expressed the concern that colleagues in the country upon which the scholar’s research focused would likely find the cost of ordering that book to be prohibitive. In light of this, the scholar expressed the wish to deposit the entire book in the university’s open-access repository. The other expressed the issue in a more theoretical manner, arguing that the monetization of research outputs by corporations has created inequities of access across the global scene.

Two other scholars, however, saw financial remuneration as a reward reasonably expected by authors, especially by those publishing books with commercial presses. One of these scholars indicated that such royalties were important “for writers who depend on them to write the next book.”

Generally speaking, the maintenance of open-access repositories by academic institutions or organizations (MLA Commons, Columbia University’s Academic Commons, etc.), insofar as this was mentioned, was viewed as a valuable service. One scholar did, however, mention that “the lack of federation between” such repositories has created a “fractured” environment, in which it

can be difficult to know where it is best to go to deposit one's own work or to look for the work of others.

It could be speculated that this absence of federation among institutional repositories has led to the rise in popularity of user-friendly commercial platforms such as Academia.edu, which appears to be addressing the problem of scholars' abilities to discover one another's work easily. Opinions regarding this platform varied among the scholars we interviewed. One scholar stated: "I like Academia.edu very much, because it's like the Facebook of the academy. It's great because I discover works that I had no idea about, people who work in my field that I had no idea about, people who see my work." Others were "wary" of the fact that Academia.edu is a private business. And one scholar went so far as to complain that it was "squatting on" the ".edu domain," which "is supposed to be restricted to nonprofit educational institutions."

Networking and Social Media

All scholars, in one way or another, attested to the value of traditional, face-to-face interpersonal networking. In the discovery and access phase, scholars note that interaction with archivists is crucial to the nature and quality of access the researcher will receive. As far as keeping pace with developments in their own field, many scholars state that they rely on advice from their colleagues. Conference attendance is cited as an especially important means of interacting with a range of relevant colleagues.

The spectrum of opinions voiced on the value of online social media is decidedly more mixed. On the negative end of the spectrum some scholars plainly express the sentiment: "I don't do social media." The scholar who appears to be the most engaged follows "a good amount of academics on Twitter," noting that this helps him to keep track of various academic debates and to consider a variety of voices. But even this scholar expressed concern about the time-consuming and "deeply toxic" nature of social media. This latter concern appears to stem from the manner in which ideas might be questioned or criticized.

Most of the scholars who do use social media take a conservative approach. For example: "I'm on Facebook, I find it is a good way of learning about some things. So you learn about conferences, projects, initiatives. Sometimes people post about their books. Or talks that are relevant to new books."

Emerging Forms of Evaluation and Communication

At many academic libraries, faculty members have started to rely on librarians to assist them—for purposes of tenure and promotion, as well as to gauge impact more generally—in using metrics to assess the impact of their scholarship. Among the faculty interviewed for this project, however, these emerging metrics are less relevant for scholars working in literature and languages. One scholar notes that "questions like impact are not as relevant in the humanities, because it's less data driven. And so there is more of an interest in the ways in which scholarly output is shaping the fields. The kinds of important conversations that it's engaging with." This

leads to valuing in the humanities of the “kinds of journals” in which a scholar’s work is “being published” and “certain academic presses.”

Many academic librarians have also increased their support for scholars’ work in non-traditional formats. That support continues to be complicated by the evolving criteria for measuring the value of that work in tenure and promotion cases. One scholar notes that “for digital projects, non-book projects, all scholarship that doesn’t take the shape of a book or article, we are in a position where it is not clear how to evaluate such materials.” This scholar goes on to observe that “there are many attempts to try to rethink evaluation criteria currently.”

Conclusions

As demonstrated by the work of the scholars interviewed in this study, research in literature and language fields is diverse. These researchers use multidisciplinary methods and engage with a wide range of topics in their work, while drawing on sources in many genres and formats. In addition, they deploy tactics that they themselves often describe as idiosyncratic, but that fairly consistently include an engagement with archival or artifactual sources and an often non-linear search process that involves using formal and informal bibliographies in both print and online formats, as well as information directly gathered through communications with other scholars.

Through its inclusion of many tenured faculty members, this study captures the views of a number of researchers who have witnessed the digital revolution in libraries. The interviewees have experienced a growing ease and efficiency in getting access to sources, both primary and secondary. Nonetheless, the importance of the physical artifact—archival documents, rare books, graphic art, and so on—remains high. Consequently, these faculty members continue to face obstacles to discovering and gaining access to research materials, particularly when those materials are housed in archives and libraries outside of the United States. Different cultures and professional practices in archives and libraries (both in and outside of the U.S.) require that researchers develop not only traditional research skills, but also an awareness of the ways in which cultural context affects researcher workflows. Scholars must develop research strategies and/or professional networks that can provide necessary workarounds.

Only one interviewee spoke at length about using digital methodologies (e.g., text analysis); however, several interviewees described using digital tools in less formal ways to manage their research. Many described taking digital photographs of archival materials for research purposes, but those same interviewees described the challenge of managing the large number of photographs, notes, and other research “data” that they produce. Similarly, many respondents praised the ease of access that digital full-text databases and indices provide; nonetheless, faculty members complained about problems searching across digital collections, the lack of transparency about databases’ curation principles and search algorithms, and the general issue of information overload. Finally, multiple faculty members discussed wanting to take advantage of new publishing models (e.g., open access) and new forms of scholarly communication; however, the interviewees also described their needing a better understanding

of copyright, how and why to negotiate authors' rights, and what criteria are used to evaluate non-traditional modes of scholarship.

The observations and recommendations cited at the outset of this report suggest how libraries can translate our findings into possible actions. Such possible actions could take the form of intra-campus delivery of print circulating materials to align with now common expectations for ease of access, more consistency in description and metadata for print and ebooks, and more coordinated outreach and co-teaching across library units with the objective of providing users with a coherent understanding of research across digital, print, rare, and circulating collections. Our cohort of faculty suggested, explicitly and implicitly, several opportunities for greater engagement with libraries around research data management, authors' rights, and other issues related to discovery, access and use of our collections.

In addition to sharing this report with library colleagues and faculty at Columbia University, reviewing and discussing the outcomes of the parallel studies conducted in this Ithaka S+R research stream will enrich our understanding of how to support faculty in the fields of literatures and languages. Our in-depth conversations with faculty validate the importance of engaging with our researchers about and around their work, placing their needs and ideas at the center of ongoing planning for collections and services.

Appendices

Appendix A: Study Methodology

Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Appendix C: Consent Form

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Appendix A: Study Methodology

Ithaka S+R developed the methodology for the study and provided training to investigators at participating institutions. The protocol for this study was approved by Columbia University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and all interviewees provided informed consent for their participation in the study.

Our local research team consisted of six librarians, all with advanced academic training and research-support experience in humanities disciplines, and one library administrator serving in the role of principal investigator. Over a three-week period in early 2019, we sent targeted recruitment emails to tenured faculty in seven modern language and literature departments. While representativeness is not a feature of qualitative studies, we identified a range of potential faculty respondents working in different languages, topics, and time periods within the overall languages and literature field. Employing a semi-structured interview guide provided by Ithaka S+R (Appendix D), four members of the study team conducted interviews with a total of 11 faculty members in the Spring of 2019 (six full professors, two associate professors, and three assistant professors). The recorded interviews, each from 30 to 60 minutes in length, were transcribed by an external vendor and anonymized, and this data was submitted to Ithaka S+R for analysis and use in the capstone report they are generating.

This local report is based on additional analysis conducted by our research team of the anonymized transcripts of Columbia faculty interviews. All seven members of our team contributed to the development of a data-driven codebook that guided the coding of all transcripts, and three of the interviews were coded by multiple team members to ensure consistency and validity of our process. Coded interview text was extracted and compiled to facilitate identification of trends and patterns in the responses. Team members divided the task of distilling and summarizing findings across major topics addressed in this report. Our methodology is not designed to produce statistically significant findings but instead provides an in-depth look at the research practices of our cohort of interviewees.

Appendix B: Email Recruitment Text

Subject: Invitation to participate in Ithaka S+R Languages & Literatures Study

Dear [Name of Professor],

The Humanities & Global Studies department of the Columbia University Libraries is conducting research about how best to support faculty who conduct research in literature in all languages; culture (e.g. folklore, performance studies, and literary history); and writing studies. The goal of the study, which has been approved by Columbia University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), is to improve services to researchers like you at Columbia University.

Your perspective would be especially helpful for the study because [insert specific information about faculty's research/experiences]. Would you be willing to participate in a one-hour interview to share your unique experiences and perspectives?

This local study is part of a larger suite of parallel studies being simultaneously undertaken at a number of institutions of higher education in the United States. This effort is coordinated by [Ithaka S+R](#) (a not-for-profit organization specializing in higher education), in partnership with the Modern Languages Association. The anonymized, aggregated information gathered at Columbia University will be sent to Ithaka S&R, where it will be analyzed in the context of information gathered at other institutions. Ithaka's end-product will be a public report comparable to those they have produced in the past. (See, for example: [Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Asian Studies Scholars](#).) The new Ithaka S&R report will be essential for articulating how the research support needs of scholars in literatures and languages are evolving across the U.S. We will also prepare a local report that will be shared with Columbia stakeholders and with the public.

If you have any questions about the study, please don't hesitate to reach out and thank you so much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Pamela Graham (Principal Investigator), on behalf of the Ithaka S+R Languages and Literatures Study team: Nancy Friedland, Jeremiah Mercurio, Sócrates Silva, and John Tofanelli

Appendix C: Consent Form

Columbia University Libraries
Research Support Services for Modern Languages and Literatures

Thank you for participating in the Columbia University Libraries Research Support Services Study for Modern Languages and Literatures.

This study seeks to examine the research practices of faculty in modern languages, culture (e.g. folklore, performance studies, and literary history) and writing studies in order to understand the resources and services that faculty at Columbia University need to be successful in their teaching and research.

Your participation in the study involves a sixty-minute audio-recorded interview about your research practices. Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the interview at any time for any reason. Such reasons do not require explanation.

There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. You may experience benefits in the form of increased insight and awareness into your research practices and support needs.

If you choose to participate in this study, your name will not be linked to your interview responses at any time. We do not include your name on any of the interview data and there is no link between this consent form and your responses.

For more information about this study, please contact Pamela Graham, Principal Investigator, at (xxx) xxx-xxxx. If you have questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects at (212) 854-7040, or access their website at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/irb>.

I understand and consent to participate in the study as described above including. I grant Columbia University Libraries permission to use this recording for the purpose of utilizing my feedback and to share this information with the academic community, and waive my rights to review or inspect the tapes prior to such use.

Please print your name:

Signature of Research Participant:

Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Ithaca S+R Language and Literature Project
Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Research Focus and Methods

Describe the research project(s) you are currently working on.

- Tell me a bit more about how the research for the project has unfolded step-by-step [choose one project if multiple were listed above], e.g. developing the topic, identifying and working with the information needed for the research, plans for sharing the results.
- How does this project and process of researching relate to how you've done work in the past?
- How does this project relate to the work typically done in your department(s) and field(s) you are affiliated with?

Working with Archives and Other Special Collections

Do you typically rely on material collected in archives or other special collections [e.g. rare books, unpublished documents, museum artifacts]? If so,

- How do you find this information? How did you learn how to do this? Does anyone ever help you?
- Where do you access this information [e.g. on-site, digitally]?
- How and when do you work with this information? [E.g. do you use any specific approaches or tools?]
- Have you encountered any challenges in the process of finding, accessing or working with this kind of information? If so, describe.
- To what extent do you understand and/or think it is important to understand how the tools that help you find and access this information work? [E.g. finding aides, online museum catalogues; "Do you understand how database x decides which content surfaces first in your searches?" and, "Do you care to understand?"]
- Are there any resources, services or other supports that would help you more effectively work with this kind of information?

Working with Secondary Content

What kinds of secondary source content do you typically rely on do your research [e.g. scholarly articles or monographs]?

- How do you find this information? How did you learn to do this? Does anyone ever help you?
- Where do you access this information [e.g. on-site, digitally]?
- How and when do you work with this information? [E.g. do you use any specific approaches or tools?]

- Have you encountered any challenges in the process of finding, accessing or working with secondary sources? If so, describe.
- To what extent do you understand and/or think it is important to understand how the tools that help you find and access this information work? [E.g. algorithmic bias, processes for creating and applying keywords; “Do you understand how Google Scholar decides which articles surface first in your searches?” and, “Do you care to understand?”]
- Are there any resources, services or other supports that would help you more effectively locate or work with secondary sources?

Scholarly Communications and Evaluating Impact

How are your scholarly outputs [e.g. books, peer reviewed journal articles] evaluated by your institution and to what ends [e.g. tenure and promotion process, frequency of evaluations]?

- Have you observed any trends and/or changes over time in how scholarly outputs are being evaluated [e.g. shift in emphasis between books and articles, shift in emphasis in the extent to which the prestige or impact factor of a publication is considered]?
- Beyond tenure and promotion, does your institution evaluate your scholarly outputs towards any other ends [e.g. benchmarking your/your departments performance using analytics software]? If so, how, and to what ends?
- What have been your experiences of being evaluated in this way?
- Have you observed these kinds of processes having a larger effect on your department and/or institutional culture?

To what extent do you engage with or have an interest in any mechanisms for sharing your work beyond traditional publishing in peer reviewed journals or monographs? To what ends? [E.g. posting in preprint archives to share with peers, creating digital maps or timelines for students, creating outputs for wider audiences.]

Do you engage with any forms of social networking, including academic social networking, as a mechanism for sharing and/or engaging with other scholars? If no, why not? If so,

- Describe the platform(s) you currently use and how.
- What do you like best about the platform(s) you currently use and what do you like least?
- Are there any other ways the platform(s) could be improved to best meet your needs?

Beyond the information you have already shared about your scholarly communications activities and needs, is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know about your experiences?

Research Training and Wrapping Up

Looking back at your experiences as a researcher, are there any forms of training that were particularly useful? Conversely, are there any forms of training you wish you had gotten and/or would still like to get? Why?

Considering evolving trends in how research is conducted and evaluated, is there any form of training that would be most beneficial to graduate students and/or scholars more widely?

Is there anything else from your experiences and perspectives as a researcher, or on the topic of research more broadly, that you think would be helpful to share with me that has not yet been discussed in this conversation?



Columbia University IRB

IRB-AAAS1451 (Y01M00)

IRB Exemption Date: 12/14/2018