

# Information Technology and Humanities Scholarship

*Humanities scholars are moving toward a radical change in how they conduct research*

By **Daniel Greenstein**

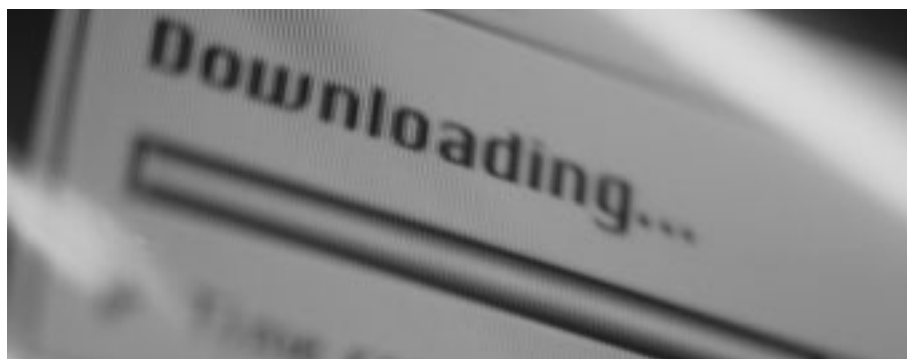
The days are gone when scholars in the humanities might barricade themselves in their library carrels, disdaining the use of electronic technologies in research and writing. For many, the word processor, the online library catalog, digitized collections, and electronic search services have become indispensable tools. Some humanists even create new resources and pursue new lines of inquiry made possible by new technologies for searching, linking, and recombining data. To determine exactly what humanists are looking for, how they go about it, and how libraries should shape digital collections and services to meet humanists' needs requires knowledge specific to this group of academics.

Accordingly, a research group in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign launched "The Scholarly Work in the Humanities Project," designed to answer three main questions:

- How do humanities scholars think about, organize, and perform their research?
- How are information sources used throughout the research process?
- How do electronic information sources affect work practices?

Additionally, the project asked two library-service questions:

- What functions and characteristics make one resource better than another?
- How can the traditional role of the



library as a repository for printed works be reconciled with the provision of virtual, unlocated resources?

With funding initially from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Campus Research Board and later from the Digital Library Federation, the project interviewed scholars, observed their research activity, analyzed the resulting data, and produced a report, *Scholarly Work in the Humanities and the Evolving Information Environment*, written by William S. Brockman, Laura Neumann, Carole L. Palmer, and Tonya J. Tidline and published by the Digital Library Federation and the Council on Library and Information Resources. Among many insightful findings are these:

- Electronic mail fosters more collaboration among humanities scholars than was previously characteristic of them.
- Much material of use to scholars remains undigitized, but electronic catalogs and finding aids make humanists' research travel more efficient.

- Humanists use digital texts for sophisticated research beyond mere retrieval and reading.

However, a lack of uniformity among systems complicates scholars' searching and manipulation of results. Copyright laws are keeping the most recent—and often the best—editions out of full-text, electronic databases. Some databases lack word-processing features to which scholars have become accustomed. And because of digital-resource instability, scholars are wary of archiving and publishing electronically.

Nonetheless, the authors of the report say,

Electronic texts are potentially the most radical element in the construction of the evolving technological environment in the humanities. The explosion of electronic texts promises to alter the way in which scholars conceive of the activity of research in a way paralleled only by similarly major developments in the history of printing—the

paperback revolution of the post-World War II years, the development of mechanized printing in the nineteenth century, and the invention of moveable type in the fifteenth century.... Humanities scholarship has only begun to integrate electronic text.

The authors conclude that technology has accelerated certain research and writing processes for humanities scholars and enabled them to extend their inquiries into a larger base of resources, but technology has also left humanists feeling less in control of “their searching, chaining, and browsing practices” and unsure how to make digital resources work for them. Those who most use electronic resources are developing collections of their own, which often are managed by ad hoc “gurus” instead of by the campus library.

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On the basis of their findings, the authors advocate two particular kinds of service improvements that libraries could provide:

1. Development of collection criteria that reflect scholars’ research strategies and paths of inquiry and that, in turn, attach less importance to opportunistic collection of large corpora.
2. Services that assist in the development and federation of scholars’ personal or localized collections

and that tap and mobilize the communal expertise of users and collectors of texts.

Developing new technologies “that really work for scholars” is imperative, in the view of the report’s writers, and the report’s findings can greatly help research libraries do that. The full study is available online at <<http://www.clir.org/pubs/abstract/pub104abst.html>>. Printed copies can be ordered at that site or by calling or writing the Council on Library and Information Resources, 1755 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Suite 500, Washington, D.C., 20036, 202-939-4750. *e*

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*Daniel Greenstein (Daniel.Greenstein@ucop.edu), formerly director of the Digital Library Federation, co-publisher of the report, is now university librarian and executive director of the California Digital Library.*