Log Analysis of Internet Resources in the Arts and Humanities (LAIRAH): Project Summary

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Digital Humanities is a relatively young but very productive discipline. In its short history scholars have produced thousands of digital resources which have been funded by governments, philanthropic bodies and universities. In the UK alone, over 250 digital humanities projects have been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) since 1998. Yet what happens to such resources after completion is poorly understood. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some projects become well known but others have been relatively quickly forgotten, wasting both considerable intellectual effort and time expended in its production, and potentially considerable amounts of funding. No systematic survey of digital resource usage in the humanities has been undertaken, and the characteristics of a project that might predispose it for sustained use have never been studied.

The LAIRAH (Log analysis of Internet Resources in the Arts and Humanities) project (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/research/circah/lairah/) based at UCL's School of Library Archive and Information Studies undertook a 15 month study to discover what influences the long-term sustainability and use of digital resources in the humanities. The complete LAIRAH report is available from the website.

Research objectives

- To determine the scale of the use of digital resources in the humanities, using deep log analysis of the Humbul, Artifact and AHDS portal sites.
- To determine whether resources that are used share any common characteristics.
- To highlight areas of good practice, and aspects of project design that might be improved to aid greater use and sustainability.

Key findings

Use Levels:

Levels of resource use were difficult to evaluate due to changes in service provision during the research period. However, our findings suggest that 30-35% of digital resources remain unused. This is comparable to the number of scientific articles that remain un-cited.

Signposting:

Non-expert users found it difficult to understand the purpose of several resources. As well as an unambiguous project title, they required information about the contents, scope and how it was selected; the purpose of the resource; and advice about how it might be used.

Documentation:

Few projects kept formal documentation or made it easily available. The exceptions were projects in linguistics, archaeology and archives, areas in which the scholarly community regards documentation as an integral part of research.

User contact:

Few projects carried out formal user testing, thus have little idea of the needs of their user community. Those projects which had carried out user tests were amongst the most well-used in our survey.

Dissemination:

Successful projects had worked hard to disseminate information about their resource. Individual scholars served as important exemplars of good practice: respect for their scholarship in digital humanities inspired others to undertake similar research.

Staffing:

Staff who are knowledgeable both about humanities research and ICT techniques were key to successful projects. However, a lack of appropriate training meant that they were difficult to find, and scarce funding made them difficult to retain from one project to another.

Sustainability:

Few projects realised the importance of ensuring their resource remained sustainable and that both content and interfaces must be maintained and updated (beyond deposit with AHDS). However, funding for maintenance is difficult to obtain.

Recommendations

The LAIRAH project produced a list of recommendations which described how the ideal well-used resource would have been designed and maintained. This includes recommendations for projects regarding: Content (including naming, subject, log maintenance, and documentation); Users (user consultation, user centred design, accessibility and usability issues); Management (the role of technical support, staffing issues, training, and retaining of staff); Dissemination (interface design, resources updating, publicity). Recommendations for funding bodies were also made including: Duties of projects (making log data available, involving AHDS, consulting with other projects, resource dissemination); Maintenance of log data by AHRC; understanding the problems of broad vs. deep usage when allocating funding; the importance of libraries and librarians, documentation, sustainability, and training and career development. The full list of recommendations is available from http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/research/circah/lairah/summary/, and is part of the main project report.

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