EUROPEAN SCIENCE FOUNDATION (ESF)
Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH)
*Strategic workshop on research communities
and research infrastructures in the Humanities*
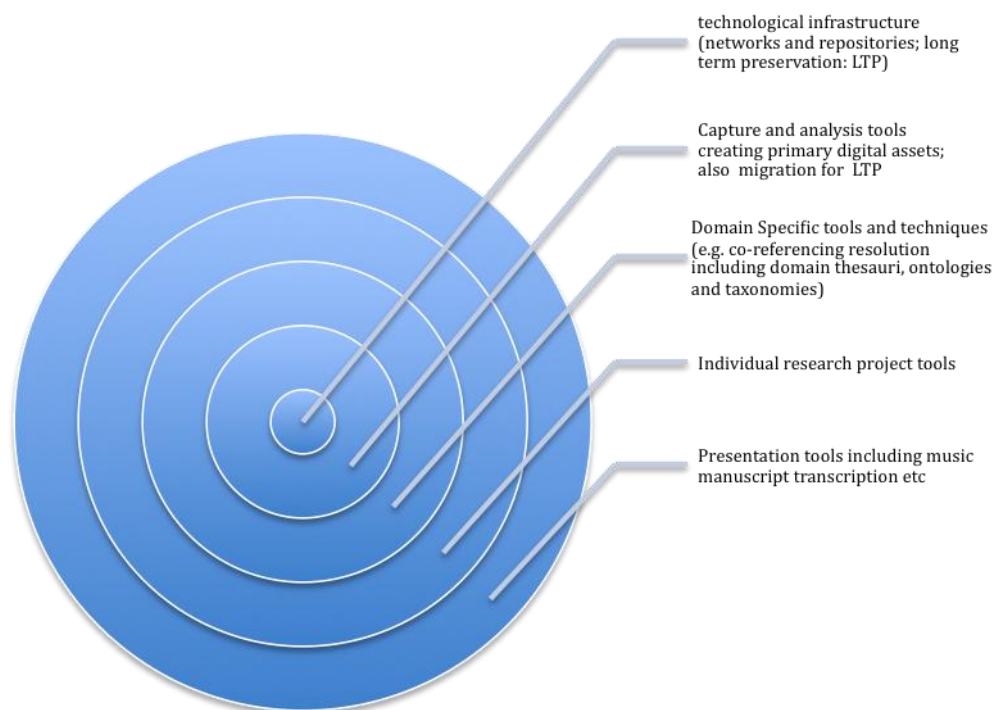Strasbourg – France, 29-30 October 2010

Feedback from participants

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technological infrastructure (networks and repositories; long term preservation: LTP)

Capture and analysis tools creating primary digital assets; also migration for LTP

Domain Specific tools and techniques (e.g. co-referencing resolution including domain thesauri, ontologies and taxonomies)

Individual research project tools

Presentation tools including music manuscript transcription etc

Why do people expect to do it all?

Inner ring and outer ring: mainly generic computer science, but some information science and generic humanities documentation (e.g. presentation of music; IPR control)
Capture and analysis and Domain specific tools (collaborating, interdisciplinary competence centres, potentially virtual or distributed and providing regional, national and European services)
Project tools (embedded ICT competence in local interdisciplinary teams)
The role of interdisciplinarity and co-development (NOT "one side and the other")
Exploration and serendipity – you need tools that humanities professionals can use to explore and "for fun" – to stimulate questions of which they had not previously conceived.

The EPOCH research agenda is online at
http://public-repository.epoch-net.org/publications/RES_AGENDA/final_res.pdf

The executive summary is a bit long and really only has the recommendations - we were going to produce a cut down version but didn't have time in the end.

Dr Chris Armbruster
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Thank you for the summary, which indeed covers the discussion very well. I understand that policy documents must be inclusive/open/ connective, but I do think that it would be worthwhile to focus on some key issues in a much more strategic manner. At least internally (for the ESF) one should probably be much clearer about alternatives, weaknesses and pitfalls, not least to understand much more clearly which avenues are the most promising.

One way of dealing with this issue is to have a survey that is also evaluative and points to failure, weakness, barriers, challenges etc among existing projects.

Two examples:

1. RCs & digital infrastructure building (themes, priorities) A critical issue is that these infrastructures more frequently are built "for" the humanities, not by humanities scholars. This is an important issue, a real difference to the sciences, problematic in the context of the humanities and the influence of senior scholars, an experiment with an unclear outcome, and potentially a lot of wasted resources.
One may, of course, simply say that both routes are valid (& that is a hedge in some ways), but it would probably be a good idea to consider the risks involved in this kind of approach. If these risks turn out to be significant, indicating that some of the (planned) larger humanities infrastructure will most likely not succeed, for a lack of support & adoption in the community (ultimately resulting in de- funding), it would be a good idea to prepare for that eventuality...

2. Platform, portal and other Internet based solutions The Internet is evolving fairly rapidly, and this means that some solutions pioneered previously are not of much value nowadays, and also not future-proof. Portals are the classic example. They look like a good idea because they seemingly offer a single point of access to a group of resources. However, portals are a collection of links that need updating like any old address book - an expensive solution for something that search engines do better and cheaper.
Moreover, portals are static, not dynamic like platforms. Digital RIs, almost by definition, must be multi-sided platforms that connect depositors, authors, users, software developers and so on. They will be innovation intensive, which immediately raises the question whether this will be public infrastructures only, or will require private partners - i.e. governance and funding issues will be paramount.

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We recently had a review of e-Infrastructure in the UK (I was involved through my role in ESRC). I think the review document is quite good, especially in the definition of infrastructure - it has been well received in the UK and US. In fact there was not so much specific Arts and Humanities input but it is certainly inclusive of these disciplines.

http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/escience/einfrastructure.htm

Personally I think it is crucial to address the social dimensions of the infrastructure (as you raised in your question on Friday).

I also have strategy documents in my role as UK National Strategic Director for e-Social Science (which we are rebranding to "Digital Social Research") which may be relevant. Here is another influential report - the international review of the UK e-Science programme:

http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/research/intrevs/escience/Pages/default.aspx

It's worth a quick look from page 52 for the major recommendations (this is page 60 in the PDF).

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One of the issues that struck me over the weekend was the need for a knowledge-sharing infrastructure that would encourage Digital Humanities practitioners to step outside of their discrete projects to disseminate their work and findings--not just to colleagues in the field but also to colleagues who are curious about DH but haven't engaged with it yet. This could be extended to cater to the outreach and 'new culture' beyond the academy that you identified in your remarks.

As I mentioned to you briefly on Saturday my Scholarcast model may be of some use in this regard (www.ucd.ie/scholarcast). The concept is simple: research-oriented podcasting with the emphasis on high production values and quality user experience. The podcasts are designed to be of lasting value unlike the vast quantity of academic podcasts available online which are often ephemeral, poorly produced or intended as communications PR for individual institutions (iTunesU, etc). PDF transcripts of each podcast are also available for download, to facilitate citation and to maximize multidisciplinary exchange.

Might it be worth thinking of a project like this at ESF level as a way of disseminating developments and debate within the Digital Humanities at large? A good way to kick this off might be to commission the speakers of this weekend's workshop to produce 20 minute podcasts on their various projects; or on the pressing issues in Digital Humanities, as they see them.

I won't go into logistics of Scholarcast production at this point but would be happy to discuss this further if it's of interest. By the way, in terms of impact my project currently registers an average of 3000 audio downloads per month worldwide.

This may be implicit in some of the points already made [ate the workshop] but I'd like to bring up the importance of some kind of peer review structure across the Digital Humanities. Personally I would love to have my Scholarcast project peer-reviewed but don't know of any structure that would facilitate it. This would be an important learning experience for me but it would also help in terms of recognition, within and beyond my home institution, of the project and the work involved in it.

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Digital Keys for Unlocking the Humanities' Riches, By Patricia Cohen
Published on the "New York Times" (November 16, 2010):
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/17/arts/17digital.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=google%20text%20humanities&st=cse

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[He made some additions to our summary slides as following]

- In relation to bridging traditional RIs in the humanities with digital RIs: enhance traditional RIs in the humanities into digital RIs
- In relation to typology of RI:
  - Primary: original data /documents
  - Secondary: metadata
- In relation to the ecosystem of RIs: Hierarchy of service provider
  - Worldwide/European technical infrastructure (eg. Grid)

- - European /National Competence centres at community level (DARIAH / CLARIN)
- In relation to the "dynamic functioning (beyond project-based)" of RIs he added the word 'stable' and the concept of long term preservation via trusted repositories at different levels
- In relation to the issue of "Ownership vs. licensing", he mentioned the copyright problems
- In relation to the priority of making "survey/study of RIs", he associated this to the survey/study of existing systems stating the following: One step in this direction should be a study about standards and tools used or in development inside as well as outside the mainstream of European and/or national projects and infrastructure development eg. Academies, Research units in Universities and their departments, Libraries etc.
- In relation to the priority of having RIs that develop standards, to act as trusted repositories and to provide funding to create and maintain them long term, he included the word "long term preservation".
- In relaton to grand challenges he states:
  - A new kind of culture of research is necessary that accepts the process character of digital editions and publications.
  - A new academic rewarding system must appreciate electronic editions, publications eg. review them in highly ranked journals and accept them as excellent research contributions if they are well reviewed.
- In addition, he makes the following points:
  - Influence of new (and unforeseeable) technical developments → fast change as an ongoing process
  - Influence of commercial activities (Google, Apple stm-publisher…)
  - Community driven addititonal services (like CERL - http://www.cerl.org/web/) for the cost effective development of intermediary services and the reduction of diversity
  - Local or institutional activities to provide services for universities or research bodies (like Competence Centre in Trier)
  - Everybody starting e-research should be sure that he will find a service provider for his (successful) activities, and the open access and long term storage of his data and publications.
  - Research infrastructure for open access publications and long term storage is in some countries not existing or not yet sufficiently developed. EU programs should help to fill the gap.

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My only concern was the lack of proper initiatives leading towards practical issues, either in terms of convincing policy makers or in terms of providing indicators of excellence. This second issue seems to me rather pressing since many of these RI require not just notorious economic resources, but also an equally important amount of time for their proper development and maintenance.

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As I promised, I would like to share my impressions from the workshop as someone who is not involved in the digital humanities at all.
I wondered if the digital Humanities is a small formation within the humanities or if you think it will/should be the way to go for the humanities as a whole. I'm not sure about that.
My impression was that the use of new digital technologies is often combined, and I apologize for this critical impact, with scientific research questions which are in fact very old. So it seemed to me that "old science"
and "new technology" go together very well. And that is an interesting fact, also for the financial support of projects. Traditional research questions, it seemed to me, can justify new technologies much better than research questions, which are not that established in the field.
But when it comes to the question how to gain new members for the "movement"

of digital humanities", I would admit, at least in my view, the use of new technology would have to be combined with innovative and qualitative research questions. Because as a scientist first of all I'm interested in a research work which is challenging and innovative and not only the tools I use for the work.

In some of the presentations I got the impression that the digital humanities aim at a transformation of the humanities into empirical field studies and say "no" to the aim of "Grundlagenforschung" which is a discussion for a about 10 years now, as far as I can see it. Prove me wrong if that is not the case, I'm not sure about that, but sometimes I had the impression, that the economic use and value of the humanities is a hot topic in the field.

What I also find very interesting that it seems to me that more or less the most "traditional" fields within the humanities are using the high tech digital tools and also the dominance of the linguistic area is striking, as this field has to cope with huge amounts of data.

But media studies could do this also, in fact, at least the media studies within the humanities, does not. It is much more occupied to study the effects from these tools in a qualitative sense.

From the viewpoint of the digital humanities this seems to be a dinosaur position, which will die out in the future, if I got that right. But the notion of innovation, at least in my view, it not automatically linked to new technologies. This is a very utopian view, which is driven by the idea of a technological progress.

So, don't get me wrong: I'm not at all against these uses of digital uses within the humanities, but when it comes to question, what kind of projects are financially supported I would appreciate a policy which takes care of the scientific as well as the technological progress in combination.

Otherwise what you get is "alter Wein in neuen Schläuchen" (in German: old wine in new glasses).