

## Book Review: Digital Libraries and the Challenges of Digital Humanities

Jeffrey A. Rydberg-Cox. Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2005. ISBN (paperback) 1-84334-134-4

Digital Libraries and the Challenges of Digital Humanities is the title of this book, but my heart sank when I realised the conception the author had of the digital humanities: text, texts and more texts – no place for oral history recordings, archaeological fieldwork, digitised images, historical datasets or virtual reality. Omitting subjects such as these in a study with humanities in the title is rather like writing a history of Europe while leaving out the countries that border the Mediterranean.

But leaving aside this issue of nomenclature, the book is something of a useful call-to-arms for improved thinking about how digital texts for scholarship can properly fulfil the advantages provided by their digital state. Rydberg-Cox points to the challenge of online providers such as Google and Amazon, and shows how their various digital services provide a template for how digital data can be searched, analysed, recorded, saved and manipulated. Those working in the digital humanities need to provide similar levels of functionality to maintain a fresh critical edge, and also to help bring their work to a larger public audience, that has high expectations of what can be achieved on the Internet.

Rydberg-Cox begins by previewing some familiar digital resources, such as the Perseus Digital Library, and then goes on to provide an introduction to the tagging and encoding of texts. Then, crucially, he explores the various types of analysis that can be undertaken on digital texts, such as keyword analysis, query expansions, multilingual information retrieval, even visualisation, showing how such analyses can aid understanding at numerous levels.

It seems that the author has a slightly prickly relationship with libraries (one of his comments questions the relevance of the library as a contemporary institution), but he has some useful observations, which may be flavoured by his working in the USA: firstly, on libraries' fascination with expensive, subscription-based resources and, secondly, the lack of infrastructural support provided by libraries for delivering digital resources developed by scholars working in a non-commercial environment. Much greater dialogue is needed, he declares, between the digital library and humanities communities.

Overall, there is a kernel of a very important idea here. There is an avalanche of digitisation going on across the world, and unquestioned assumptions are being made about the advantages provided by the provision of access to cultural material in digital form. But digitisation comes with its own problems. The problems of preservation are well documented by those working in information sciences. But there has been less debate about whether such digitised material is actually useful – the presumption has been that digitisation is a successful end in itself. So Rydberg-Cox's emphasis on the importance of tools and services that can be used to question, analyse and understand these resources is to be welcomed. Whilst he does not quite hit the full target suggested in the book's title, he is certainly managing to hit a meaningful chunk of it.

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