

LIBER Digital Humanities and Digital Cultural Heritage Working Group: a case study of international collaboration and network building

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How can European library staff working in digital humanities connect with peers in the library sector, determine where to find relevant information about digital scholarship, provide their collections as data and to be an equal partner in digital humanities research? The LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group was created as a participatory knowledge network in 2017 to address these questions. Through a series of workshops, knowledge sharing activities, and a Europe-wide survey and resulting report, the Working Group engaged with the international LIBER DH community. Useful reflections are provided on organising an open, voluntary DH community and planning for inclusive activities that benefit digital scholarship in European research libraries.

Introduction

LIBER (Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche) is the European association for research libraries. For almost fifty years, the organisation (with more than 450 members across Europe) has brought staff from research libraries together under the mission of 'Enabling World Class Research'.¹ The LIBER community publishes the Open Access journal *LIBER Quarterly* and organizes a yearly conference.

LIBER also hosts several working groups (WG) on themes related to the community-developed strategic plan. One such working group focuses on Digital Humanities (DH) and Digital Cultural Heritage and was founded in 2017 by Lotte Wilms.² The aim of this WG for the first two years was to:

Create a knowledge network of libraries around digital humanities within Europe. The goal of this network is to facilitate knowledge sharing, improving services for the academic community and thereby strengthening the relationship of European research libraries with digital scholars.³

In 2019 the WG was renewed for a further two years and we expanded our aims:

Our end goal is [...] that LIBER libraries can easily find peers in the library sector, know where to find relevant information on digital humanities, and know how to provide their collections as data and therefore be a true partner in digital humanities research.⁴

In this article, three members of the Digital Humanities Working Group describe the initial setup of the community and how we worked toward our initial and subsequent aims through three main activities: 1) structured networking and training; 2) curated content and information; and 3) a LIBER-wide survey. Each of these activities/methods was iterative, allowing us to continually engage with LIBER members, focus our aims, and organize new activities to respond to community needs. Finally, we will discuss our lessons learned as convenors of the WG and propose future work.

1. LIBER Europe. 'About Us'. LIBER Europe. Accessed 12 February 2021. <https://libereurope.eu/about-us/>.

2. KB National Library of the Netherlands

3. LIBER Europe, and Lotte Wilms. 'LIBER Launches Digital Humanities Working Group'. LIBER Europe, 3 February 2017. <https://libereurope.eu/article/liber-launches-digital-humanities-working-group/>.

4. LIBER Europe. 'LIBER Digital Humanities & Digital Cultural Heritage Working Group'. LIBER Europe. Accessed 12 February 2021. <https://libereurope.eu/working-group/digital-humanities-digital-cultural-heritage/>.

Working Group Organisation

Once the proposal was accepted by the Board of LIBER, the newly formed DH-focused working group merged with the existing Digital Cultural Heritage Forum and Digital Collections Working Groups, which were concluding their activities. The chair of the Digital Collections Working Group, Andreas Degkwitz,⁵ joined Lotte Wilms as co-chair of the DH Working Group, and in February 2017 the group began actively soliciting new members to work on a series of four themes as laid out by the co-chairs:

1. Enhancement of skills of library staff in Digital Humanities
2. Cooperation and collaboration with the research community
3. Roles of libraries in and raising awareness about DH
4. Policies and portfolios of libraries in DH

The co-chairs reasoned that these themes would cover a wide range of topics and would attract a large number and a wide range of library staff at different points in their career trajectories. In total, membership in the first two years consisted of 50 library staff from across Europe. All members were invited to join the co-chairs in regular online meetings to discuss the themes, potential activities, and what role they would like to fill in the WG.

With such a large group and the recognition of busy schedules, the decision was made to create a distinction between a core group of members who would take leadership in fulfilling the goals of the working group and satellite members who would participate in votes and activities, but who would not assume the primary responsibility in shaping the goals and initiatives of the WG. The co-chairs led the core group and each theme would be represented by a lead. All members were asked whether they were interested in leading one of the themes and their wishes were accommodated. Finally the core group for 2017-2019 consisted of Lotte Wilms, Andreas Degkwitz, Kirsty Lingstadt,⁶ Demmy Verbeke,⁷ Liam O'Dwyer,⁸ Caleb Derven,⁹ and Marian Lefferts.¹⁰

Following the renewal of the Working Group in 2019 we adapted our course to fit the needs of our members and realigned our activities along the following four themes;

1. Prov(id)ing Expertise
2. Relationship with the Research Community
3. Impact of Digital Humanities Activities in Libraries
4. Digital Collections

In 2019, Andreas Degkwitz and Demmy Verbeke left the core group and Kirsty Lingstadt stepped up to co-chair with Lotte Wilms. We were also joined by Sarah Ames,¹¹ Merisa Martinez,¹² and in the summer of 2020 Puck Wildschut¹³ made the core group complete, with two leaders responsible for each theme listed above.

A two-year work plan was developed with regular activities and output for the whole community. As in the first two years of the working group, all activities were intentionally crafted for feasibility, keeping in mind that the WG is a voluntary activity for most members who have multiple ongoing projects at their institutions. We also emphasized that input representing all levels of digital scholarship, from beginner to advanced, was valued, as the outcomes of the working group are meant to be applicable well. After the renewal this exercise was repeated for the new themes we discussed.

Method 1 - Structured Networking & Training

From its inception, the WG placed a primary focus on creating an active network and engendering a participatory culture among members. The main method to achieve this was through regularly scheduled meetings and workshops, preferably during the LIBER annual conference. The WG held four workshops during the initial 2017 through 2019 period. Unfortunately due to COVID-19 the 2020 conference was moved online and no workshops were organised.

5. Humboldt University of Berlin

6. University of Edinburgh

7. KU Leuven Libraries

8. Dublin City University

9. Glucksman Library, University of Limerick

10. Consortium of European Research Libraries

11. National Library of Scotland

12. KU Leuven Libraries

13. Utrecht University

Kick-off Workshop Patras

The kick-off workshop took place at the LIBER Conference of 2017.¹⁴ The workshop consisted of a panel of five library staff from across Europe, and was moderated by Birte Dalsgaard-Christensen from the Digital Humanities Lab of Aarhus University. Following the panel, the participants joined each panel member for a discussion using thematic posters. Collaboratively we discussed access to collections, training and skill-building for staff, organisational issues, raising awareness for DH, and cooperating with the research community. The input collected at these discussions fed into the work plan to reflect the questions and needs of libraries interested in DH.

Workshop The Hague

The burgeoning network forming around the WG convened in April 2018 at the KB National Library of the Netherlands in The Hague to discuss the newly-formed thematic teams and the work plan through 2019.¹⁵ Three clear takeaways from the meeting were a focus on working openly, library staff ownership of DH-related expertise, and the use of research questions in positioning library staff as equal partners in DH projects. Also, team leaders actively gathered use cases from workshop participants to articulate some of the challenges with performing digital scholarship in libraries.

Workshop Lille

To mark the end of the first year of the activities of the working group, members organized a pre-conference workshop at the LIBER 2018 conference in Lille. The co-chairs and team leaders presented the work completed during the previous year and invited participants to shape the working plan for the next year. Additionally, the organizers gathered feedback from conference participants in a poster session at the workshop and provided a networking opportunity during using the World Café method.

Workshop Dublin

Coinciding with the launch of the published survey report at the LIBER 2019 conference in Dublin, the DH WG ran a brief workshop to present the survey's findings, articulate subsequent recommendations, and propose new action items. Each WG team lead presented a poster and facilitated discussion among rotating groups of workshop participants. While primarily informed by the survey results, an important output of the Dublin workshop was to develop the WG's work plan for 2019 - 2021.

Webinars

Webinars were also an important activity organized by the WG and supported by the LIBER Office. The webinars were used to highlight a topic, project, or technology that is of interest to our members and to provide them with the opportunity to interact with experts on this topic. Our first webinar¹⁶ was in January 2020 and focused on the experience of several WG members in writing the book *Open a GLAM Lab*¹⁷. This was followed in April 2020 by a webinar by Tim Sherratt,¹⁸ who developed the GLAM workbench,¹⁹ which is a method of making digital collections accessible through a Jupyter Notebook.²⁰ Finally, we hosted a webinar²¹ on the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF)²² and asked several library staff from a range of institutions to share their experiences with using this framework for their digital collections. All webinars were recorded and shared on the LIBER Youtube account.²³

Method 2 - Curated content and information

Reading lists

One of our most appreciated activities is our curated reading lists. All theme leads reached out to their members to ask them their favourite articles, blog posts, books, tutorials, etc. These were all included in an open Zotero library. The most

14. LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group, and Lotte Wilms. 'Kick off Workshops for LIBER's Newest Working Group Digital Humanities'. LIBER Europe, 2017. <https://libereurope.eu/article/kick-off-workshop-for-libers-newest-working-group-digital-humanities/>.

15. LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group, and Lotte Wilms. 'Sharing & Learning From Each Other: A Very Successful First Meeting of LIBER's DH & DCH Working Group'. LIBER Europe, 24 April 2018. <https://libereurope.eu/article/sharing-learning-from-each-other-a-very-successful-first-meeting-of-libers-dh-dch-working-group/>.

16. LIBER Europe. *LIBER Webinar: Open a GLAM Lab*, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLH3n4BOA6w>.

17. Mahey, Mahendra, Aisha Al-Abdulla, Sarah Ames, Paula Bray, Gustavo Candela, Sally Chambers, Caleb Derven, et al. *Open a GLAM Lab*. QU Press, 2019. <http://qspace.qu.edu.qa/handle/10576/12115>.

18. LIBER Europe. *LIBER Webinar: Setting Up A GLAM Workbench In Your Library*, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXk60YDdaMA>.

19. Sheratt, Tim. 'GLAM Workbench'. Accessed 12 February 2021. <https://glam-workbench.github.io/>.

20. 'Project Jupyter'. Accessed 12 February 2021. <https://www.jupyter.org>.

21. LIBER Europe. *LIBER Webinar: Using IIIF to Share, Open and Enrich Your Collections*, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w52Tlga8sY&ab>.

22. 'IIIF | International Image Interoperability Framework'. Accessed 12 February 2021. <https://iiif.io/>.

23. 'LIBER Europe - YouTube'. Accessed 12 February 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7kWA9GFJ03nBmys428gYVWw>.

interesting reads were collated by the leads and curated into a short reading list. So far we have published seven lists, all on topics related to the WG:

1. Policies and portfolios by Demmy Verbeke²⁴
2. Cooperation between libraries & research communities by Liam O'Dwyer²⁵
3. Skill building by Caleb Derven²⁶
4. Role of libraries by Kirsty Lingstadt and Sarah Ames²⁷
5. Text recognition for digital collections by Lotte Wilms and Marian Lefferts²⁸
6. Researcher needs in digital humanities by Sarah Ames²⁹
7. Forming relationships in digital humanities by Liam O'Dwyer³⁰

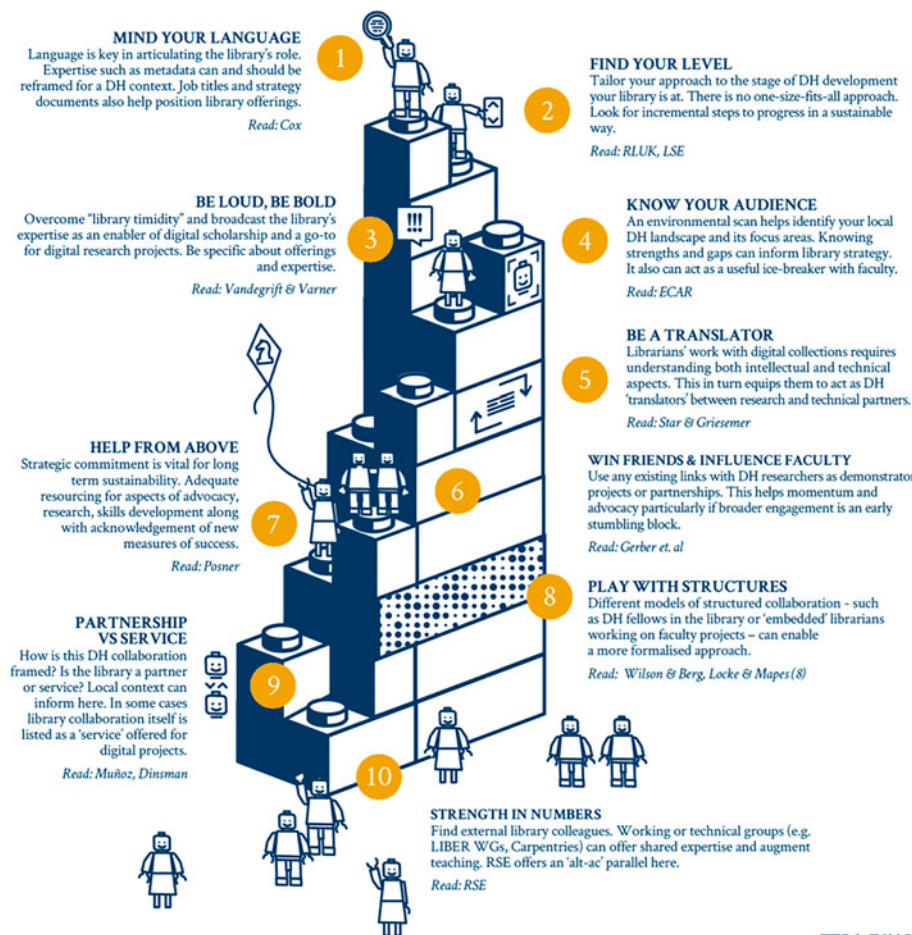
24. LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group, and Demmy Verbeke. 'A Digital Humanities Reading List: Part 1, Policies and Profiles', 29 January 2018. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.4537160>.
25. LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group, and Liam O'Dwyer. 'A Digital Humanities Reading List: Part 2, Cooperation Between Libraries and Research Communities', 5 February 2018. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.4537188>.
26. LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group, and Caleb Derven. 'A Digital Humanities Reading List: Part 3, Skill Building', 27 February 2018. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.4537139>.
27. LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group, Lingstadt, Kirsty, and Ames, Sarah. 'A Digital Humanities Reading List: Part 4, The Role of Libraries', 8 March 2018. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.4537600>.
28. LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group, Wilms, Lotte, and Lefferts, Marian. 'Reading List: Text Recognition for Digital Collections', 10 July 2020. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.4537627>.
29. LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group and Ames, Sarah. 'Reading List: Researcher Needs in Digital Humanities', 28 October 2020. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.4537631>.
30. LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group, and O'Dwyer. 'Forming Relationships in Digital Humanities', 4 January 2021. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.4475483>.

Forming relationships in Digital Humanities

Building blocks for libraries



Digital Humanities (DH) is a collaborative discipline. Libraries engaging in this field must build connections with DH research communities to be successful. Our below illustration demonstrates 10 ways in which libraries can build such relationships and points to various useful readings on this topic.



This poster came out of a group discussion of the Building Relationships sub-team of the LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group.

Full references with links can be found here:



Fig. 1. The infographic 'Forming Relationships in Digital Humanities: Building Blocks for Libraries' from the theme 'Building Relationships', curated by Liam O'Dwyer (CC-BY LIBER Europe).

What makes the reading lists so successful is that they guide interested library staff to those articles that provide an introductory understanding of a topic. Given

their length, they are suitable to share with a manager to raise awareness on certain themes, but they also provide enough information to be able to dive deeper into a topic. Asking for favourite articles is also a good way for members to contribute to an activity without overburdening them.

Challenges

At the workshop in the Hague, we discussed the various challenges library staff faced when they wanted to get started working on digital scholarship projects. We also asked for input on this through email, resulting in a comparison of an article by Miriam Posner³¹ on challenges within DH in US libraries and the replies of the WG members.³²

Mini survey

To gather input for the larger survey and to extend the work of gathering member use cases initiated during the workshops in 2017 and 2018, the WG deployed a mini-survey which was opened for responses just after The Hague workshop and through the workshop at Lille. Twenty-two respondents provided a variety of data focused around the WG’s four themes.³³ The mini-survey allowed us to attenuate the focus for and the services emphasized in the larger survey.

Method 3 - LIBER-wide survey

To better understand the state of the art and how the LIBER DH working group could add value to the ongoing digital scholarship activities in European research libraries, we developed a survey open to the whole LIBER community. The workshops and the previous mini-survey provided us with the direction we needed to develop questions that would be useful and relevant to our audience. An additional meeting of the core team of the working group at the British Library in September 2018 further shaped the survey questions and design. The resulting survey and report marked the first major European evaluation of digital humanities in libraries and built upon similar work in North America.³⁴

- 31. Posner, Miriam. ‘What Are Some Challenges to Doing DH in the Library?’, 10 August 2012. <http://miriamposner.com/blog/what-are-some-challenges-to-doing-dh-in-the-library/>.
- 32. LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group, and Lotte Wilms. ‘How Challenging Is Doing DH in a Library in 2018?’ LIBER Europe, 2018. <https://libereurope.eu/article/how-challenging-is-doing-dh-in-a-library-in-2018/>.
- 33. LIBER Digital Humanities Working Group, and Lotte Wilms. ‘A Mini Survey of Digital Humanities in European Research Libraries’. LIBER Europe, 27 August 2018. <https://libereurope.eu/article/a-mini-survey-of-digital-humanities-in-european-research-libraries/>.
- 34. Mulligan, Rikk. *SPEC Kit 350: Supporting Digital Scholarship (May 2016)*. SPEC Kit. Association of Research Libraries, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.29242/spec.350>.

Distribution of Responses from Across Europe

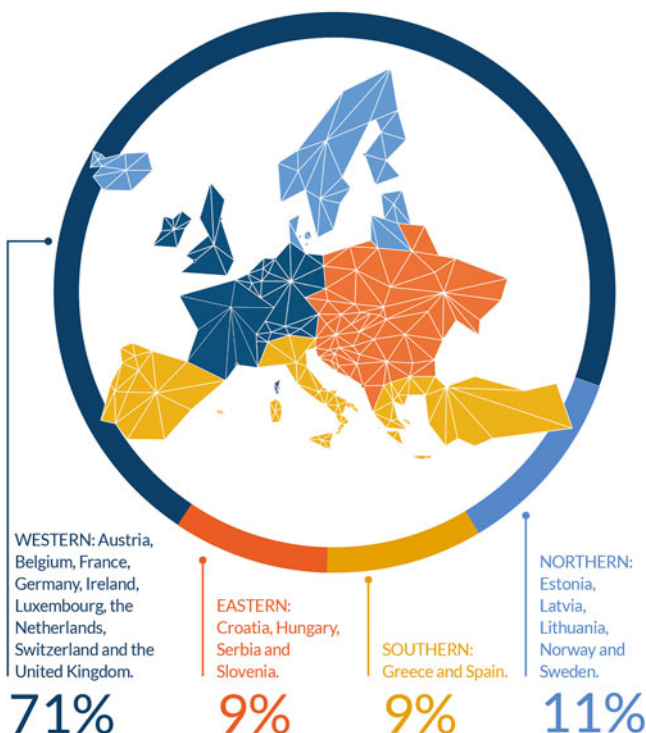


Fig. 2. The infographic ‘Distribution of responses from across Europe’ as published in the report on the survey (CC-BY LIBER Europe).

The survey consisted of 83 questions and was opened for responses between 1 February 2019 and 1 March 2019. The core working group team met in April 2019 to evaluate the survey results and plan for a summary report detailing the survey outcomes and highlighting several use cases.

Survey outcomes and report

The resulting report on the survey, *Europe's Digital Humanities Landscape: A Study from LIBER's Digital Humanities & Digital Cultural Heritage Working Group*³⁵ was published during the summer of 2019 to coincide with the LIBER conference in Dublin. Fifty-six people from 54 LIBER member libraries responded to the survey and provided comprehensive input on finances and organisation, digital humanities activities in the library, digital collections, the representation of DH in library teams and levels of collaboration amongst researchers and library staff. The survey and the report highlight a number of issues and findings, including the role of digitisation and digital preservation as key DH activities in libraries; the importance of RDM and digital preservation; creating and managing DH-related infrastructures; and the role of library staff in supporting and performing DH work. Nascent areas of concern that respondents said needed more area of attention were advocacy for library staff working in DH and the ability to identify and measure impact of digital collections. Lastly, the report made seven key recommendations for library staff to either get started in DH or to strengthen their position within the field.

35. Wilms, Lotte, Caleb Derven, Liam O'Dwyer, Kirsty Lingstadt, Demmy Verbeke, and Marian Lefferts. 'Europe's Digital Humanities Landscape: A Study From LIBER's Digital Humanities & Digital Cultural Heritage Working Group'. Zenodo, 17 June 2019. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3247286>.

Conclusions

Since beginning our collaboration in 2017, a significant number of activities and outputs have been achieved. With the range of workshops, publications (textual and audiovisual) and the survey and subsequent report we have shared knowledge, created a network, and provided the European research library community with guidelines on how to engage with digital scholarship. Although the pandemic caused some changes in the work plan, the network is still in place and colleagues can reach out to one another virtually.

The framework we created for this working group has been a rewarding experience. Organizing an international working group is enriching, and for those readers interested in setting up similar initiatives within their institutions or research communities, we recommend attention to the following points to ensure the fullest engagement possible.

Firstly, for most members, the activities are voluntary and not part of their job descriptions (and they thus do a lot of the work in their free time). Take this into account when planning activities and asking for input. Secondly, create room for everyone, do not limit membership to certain groups and take all input and needs into account. Thirdly, ensure that your activities and outcomes are understandable for your whole community (be mindful of different languages and cultures) and keep any publications brief, but point towards more detailed information. This way, the results are useful for those that might not have a lot of time to spend on the matter, but do want to know more and provide a way for those willing to dive deeper into the topic to be able to do so. Finally, we recommend that (semi-guided) networking opportunities should be part of all physical meetings and that time should be included in the agenda to do so outside of regular breaks.

As the WG comes to an end this summer, we hope the network stays in place and we are currently looking for ways to keep the LIBER engagement with our community active. In the future we hope the LIBER community (or a subset of like-minded researchers) will be able to replicate our survey to measure the extent of changes in the DH community in European research libraries during the intervening period. Until that point, we hope our work benefits the growth of DH in libraries and we are thankful to all our members who have contributed towards the development of the working group.

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