

## Round Table “Integrating libraries and Digital Humanities” at DH Benelux 2018

The core task of academic libraries is to provide access to reliable and usable data and information. This task has proven to be of crucial importance for researchers in the digital humanities. In recent years, librarians have tried to improve their support of digital humanities research even further by offering useful advice in the field of research data management. When academic librarians have the opportunity to be actively involved in research projects, they can help scholars to organise, structure, share and curate their data. Many scholars appreciate the availability of such forms of expertise in the field of RDM. Libraries are also important advocates of the Open Science movement, which is endorsed by most digital humanities scholars. Which other services the library should provide in the field of Digital Humanities, as support for tools, creation of labs and as a knowledge platform, depends on the local expertise and needs.

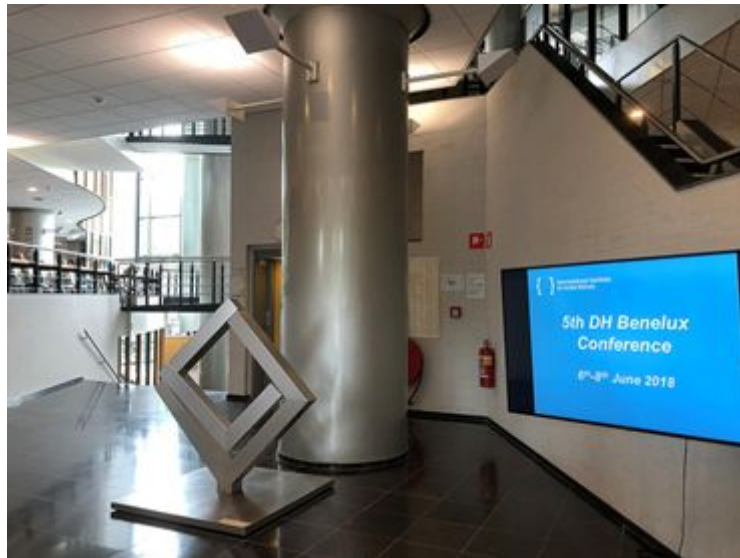


Photo from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dhbenelux/albums/72157696244640751>

Conclusions such as these and others were reached during the round table meeting during the fifth DH Benelux conference, hosted by the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. The round table was organised by the UKB working group on digital humanities. The Scheltema room, named after Annie Adama van Scheltema, the institute’s very first librarian, served as a fitting location for a debate on the various ways in which research libraries may provide support for digital scholarship. During the session, prof. dr. Hilde de Weerd, Dr. Ulrike Wuttke, Max Kemman and Sally Chambers expounded their views on four specific aspects of the collaboration between libraries and researchers. The presentations by the panellists were followed by more interactive discussions, in which members of the audience were invited to answer a number of related questions via a voting system facilitated by Kahoot.



Photo from: <https://twitter.com/DHBenelux/status/1004728599096823809>

### **The library as data supplier**

In the first presentation, Hilde de Weerd, professor of Chinese history at Leiden University, addressed the question whether libraries ought to be viewed as the main suppliers of the data scholars work with. She emphasised that academic libraries have always been suppliers of literature and data and that this will undoubtedly continue to be the case. Libraries can do much more in this area, nonetheless. When libraries manage to negotiate better deals with publishers, they may ultimately provide access to even more texts and to more data sets. At many universities, the practical support for Open Science is still in its infancy. Projects that work with big data often demand a substantial storage capacity, services in the field high performance computing and facilities for the management of data sets.

During the first interactive discussion, the audience appeared to be quite unanimous. It was recognised that, when research projects make use of data, these should be made available via open licences whenever possible. It was also stressed, nonetheless, however, that it can be difficult for libraries to initiate real changes in this area, because of conflicting interests and issues in the field of intellectual property.

### **The library as a centre of expertise in the field of data science**

The second panelist, Ulrike Wuttke, a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam, defended the view that academic libraries ought to serve as a centres of expertise on Data Science. Wuttke urged librarians to intensify their collaboration with researchers, by offering advice on how to produce and how to process data. She also suggested that libraries could begin to offer workshops and courses on the tools and the programming languages that are commonly used within digital humanities research. To accomplish goals such as these, libraries may need to collaborate more closely with the central IT departments of their universities.

Interestingly, the ideas that were put forward during this second part of the meeting were met with some more resistance. Many of the attendants appeared to be hesitant to delegate the task of organising workshops and courses to librarians. DH tools and programming languages form an intrinsic part of the methodology of research projects, and it was felt that all the courses about topics such as these should be organised by academic staff instead. A number of people also expressed some doubts regarding the technical proficiency of librarians. Are librarians actually qualified to teach courses about Digital Humanities tools? It was suggested that libraries, as a starting point, could make an inventory of the needs of their local researchers. On the basis of such an overview, they can choose to develop courses on the topics that are mentioned most frequently. Additionally, libraries could be fit to give training about tools that are created in collaboration with local researchers.

### **A third wheel**

The third speaker of the session was Max Kemman, a PhD student at the University of Luxemburg. Kemman investigates scholarly interactions between digital historians and computer scientists. He argued that, if the historians and the computer scientists can be viewed as the two wheels that can move research project forward, academic libraries may be conceptualised as a third wheel which may increase the speed and the agility of such collaborations. Libraries can help scholars to construct corpora, and to teach them the skills that are necessary to be critical towards their data and towards their methods.

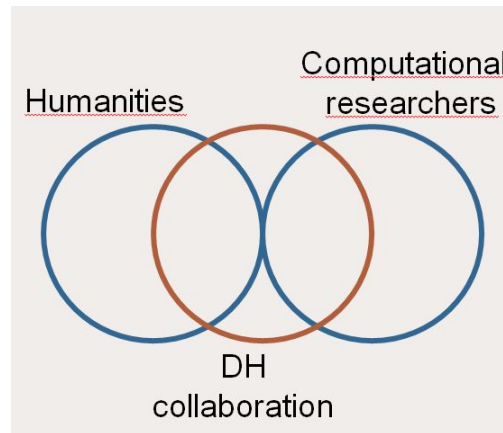


Image from PowerPoint presentation 'Collaboration between librarians and scholars' of Max Kemman, 7 June 2018

After Kemman's presentation, all the members of the audience were requested to respond to the statement that academic libraries need to build a physical lab in which DH researchers can experiment with new digital technologies. The opinions varied greatly. One librarian explained that she had actually run a DH lab at her own institution, and that the level of use of the lab was rather disappointing. To many researchers, it felt unnatural to turn to the library when they needed practical support for digital scholarship. The statement that libraries ought to organise a dating service for researchers with comparable interests sparked some laughter in the audience, because of the obvious associations with Tinder. The role of the library as facilitator for networking and a hub for exchange of knowledge remained disputed.

### **Fostering open science**

The final panellist, Sally Chambers of the University Library in Ghent, presented her ideas about the relationships between Digital Humanities and Open Science, and the role that libraries can have in structuring and managing research data. Chambers emphasized the importance of RDM support and the knowledge that libraries have about large datasets and how to curate and research these datasets. Chambers envisioned an important cooperation between libraries, supercomputers and humanities scholars. During the final interactive discussion, it became clear that the audience largely agreed with Chamber's argument. Virtually all recognised the need to curate and to share research data as open as possible.

### **Collaboration**

In the concluding statements, it was stressed that the field of digital humanities is subject to continuous transformations. New tools are being developed incessantly, and computer scientists continue to launch new algorithms, allowing for new approaches in computational research. At present, the initiative to harness these new possibilities mostly resides with researchers. It could be very useful, nonetheless, if libraries could become more active in exploring these new possibilities, and if librarians could provide practical support during the use of such innovative tools. As the discipline is very dynamic, it can clearly be challenging for librarians to remain abreast of all the latest developments. By way of reassurance, Hilde De Weerdts concluded the session on a positive note by emphasising that it is also very difficult for researchers to know and to understand all the tools that are available. Ultimately, researchers can benefit from all the help that they can get in this area.