Humanities Librarians and Virtual Verse: Changing Collections and User Services for Online Literature

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ABSTRACT

Electronic literature and digital literary publishing have grown rapidly in scope and volume in the past decade, and humanities librarians face the formidable challenge of capturing the full output of works of literature for current and future users, and determining how best to provide access to those works. This paper details the findings of the Virtual Verse in the Library project, which sought to investigate the impact of digital publishing on the access, reception, discovery, and preservation of poetry. The paper focuses on the results of the study's survey and interviews with academic librarians, and explores how library services, collections, and outreach can address the needs of students and faculty involved with digital literary publishing.

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INTRODUCTION

Electronic literature and digital literary publishing have grown rapidly in scope and volume in the past decade. Today, there are nearly 300 accredited creative writing programs at colleges and universities across North America, and the students and faculty in these programs are turning to online literary publications as authoritative sources for literary works as well as publication outlets for their own work. Librarians managing humanities collections, in particular, face the formidable challenge of capturing the full output of works of literature for current and future users, and determining how best to provide access to those works.

To explore how librarians are addressing this new and burgeoning facet of professional scholarship and scholarly communications, the authors launched the *Virtual Verse in the Library* project. Supported by an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership Planning Grant, the purpose of *Virtual Verse in the Library* was to investigate the impact of digital publishing on the access, reception, discovery, and preservation of poetry. For the core research study of *Virtual Verse in the Library*, the authors conducted three surveys and nineteen interviews with creative writing faculty, librarians, and literary

publishers. This paper in particular will focus on the results of the survey and interviews with academic librarians, and explore how library services, collections, and outreach can address the needs of students and faculty involved with digital literary publishing. Our research demonstrates that librarians have critical new roles to play in facilitating the rapid but under-acknowledged incursion of digital publishing and tools into this segment of humanities scholarly output.

BACKGROUND

Online literary magazines descended from the do-it-yourself "zine" culture of the mid-20th century. In the 1990s, photocopiers and mimeograph printing gave way to desktop computer publishing, though by the 1980s, digital media was already being utilized in works of hypertext fiction and electronic literature (Wright, 2001; Hayles, 2007). Electronic literature was one of the pioneering and most prominent manifestations of digital publishing in the humanities. The operating definition for this study draws both on the official definition of electronic literature stated by the Electronic Literature Organization, "works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer"; as well as Hayles' (2007) characterization of electronic literature as "'digital born,' a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer." As the numbers of practitioners and works of electronic literature have evolved and expanded, studies and initiatives have

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documented the scope of electronic literature and potential avenues for digital preservation: analyses conducted by Rettberg (2013), Tabbi (2007), Liu et al. (2005), and Montfort and Wardrip-Fruin (2004) have examined various aspects of documenting and preserving electronic literature. Broad initiatives have also been launched by professional organizations, including the Electronic Literature Organization's ELO Directory and their Preservation, Archiving, and Dissemination study;[2] the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Database;[3] the Australian Directory of Electronic Literature and Text-based Art repository (ADELTA);[4] nt2 of Canada;[5] PO-ex.net of Portugal[6]; LitNet of Germany;[7] as well as these initiatives' collaborative work in the Consortium for Electronic Literature (CELL).[8] Our study of electronic literature is scoped to focus on online-only poetry, as it is one of the most prolific genres published on the web and the use of media technologies to create and teach poetic works is rich and diverse.

Although the shift to electronic publishing and scholarly communication is having a dynamic effect on the literary landscape, the ways in which writers as artists and as scholars interact with information is understudied. While studies of humanities scholars' information behavior examine various aspects of humanities scholars' general use of digital content (Gilmore & Case, 1992; Siegfried, Bates, & Wilde, 1993; Wiberley & Jones, 2000; Palmer & Neumann, 2002; Brockman, Neumann, Palmer, & Tidline, 2001; Warwick, Terras, Huntington, & Pappa, 2008; Olsson, 2010; Bulger et al., 2011; Zorich, 2012), relatively little has been written about the changing information behaviors specific to the literary arts. Paling conducted a series of studies examining uses of information technologies by literary publishers and writers, and proposed a metadata schema for organizing literary works (Paling & Nilan, 2006; Paling, 2008, 2009; Paling & Martin, 2011; Paling, 2011). Most recently, Green (2014) described the publishing behaviors of creative writing faculty members via a citation analysis of print and digital literary magazines. Furthermore, in the first published article from this study, Fleming-May and Green (in press) explored creative writing faculty members' behavior surrounding online poetry seeking, reading, and publication. While not concerned with information behavior directly, studies by Stevens (2004) and Stevens and McCord (2005) explored the preservation of e-zines and determined a set of factors that correlate with e-zine stability.

Indeed, one critical aspect in engagement with online poetry is accessibility; in this regard, the role of library collections and collection management has evolved with the advent of digital collections. For decades, librarians have debated the wisdom of making free online resources available through discovery tools like the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC). Casserly (2002) notes that "In the pre-World Wide Web environment, library collections consisted exclusively of items that could be counted, labeled, housed, and tracked," but with the rise of digital content, libraries now manage hybrid collections that meld digital and analog materials (p. 580). Casserly argues, "To facilitate the transformation of their collections from analog to hybrid, academic librarians need to develop a concept of collection that will inform practice rather than dictated by it" (p. 582). The rise of inter-disciplinary scholarship in the academy has also re-shaped the processes of library collection development in significant ways. Wilson and Edelman (1996) note that "academic librarians provide information services, including collection building, through an understanding of the intellectual rather than institutional structure of the user community" (p. 197). This evolution in collection management and strategies for collection development is reflected in the ways that libraries approach digital collections and unconventional material.

Ultimately, librarians across specializations and disciplines must be equipped to handle digital content as Davenport (2007) argues, "today's information professionals require new skills and expertise to work effectively in an environment characterized by rapidly evolving technologies and organizational structures to cope with the diverse demands of information seekers" (pp. 96–97). In this light, our survey and interviews of humanities librarians regarding online-only poetry explore the ways in which information professionals are reconfiguring their collections and research support services to reflect the changing disciplinary practices and research needs of their users today.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The librarian participants were recruited through group sampling: a recruitment email was distributed to the listserv for the Literatures in the English Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries. Another round of recruitment was conducted with librarians at institutions with known creative writing programs, who were contacted individually by the investigators via direct emails.

In total, the survey was distributed to approximately 152 humanities librarians, and achieved a response rate of 58%. Of the survey respondents, 55% (n = 41) were employed at public research universities, 20% (n = 15) were from private universities, 9% (n = 7) worked at regional/comprehensive universities, 6% (n = 5) were from liberal arts colleges, and 8% (n = 6) were from community colleges and other types of institutions (Fig. 1).

Survey respondents were invited to provide contact information if they were interested in participating in a follow-up interview. Ultimately, the authors conducted seven such interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. The survey responses and interview transcripts were hand-coded for common themes by the authors and two trained graduate assistants. All four researchers reviewed the coded data and conducted multiple passes of qualitative coding to ensure inter-coder reliability. This paper includes both open-ended comments from the survey and quotes from interview participants.

ANALYSIS

In contrast to the surveys with writers and publishers, which asked about their discovery and publishing behavior in the online environment, the librarian survey (Appendix A) focused primarily on management practices for poetry collections (print and online), respondents' methods for discovering new poets and poetry, and respondents' engagement with faculty and students about online poetry and contemporary literature. There was little appreciable difference when responses were broken down by institution type, thus the data presented here was analyzed altogether.
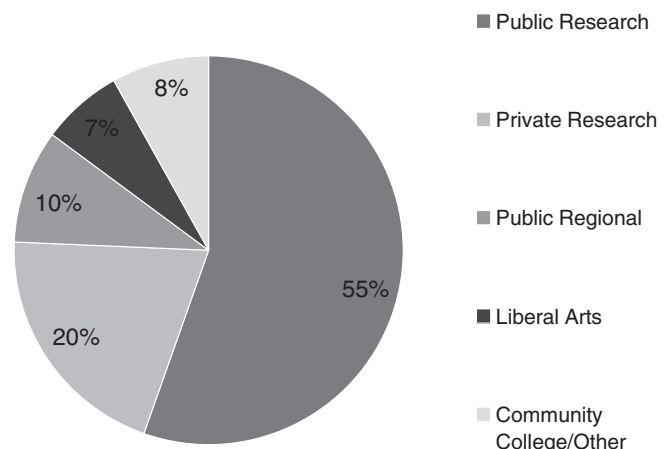

Fig. 1. Respondents by institution type.

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[2] See http://directory.eliterature.org/ and http://eliterature.org/programs/pad/.
[3] See http://elmcip.net/knowledgebase.
[4] See http://uws.edu.au/eresearch/home/projects/adelta.
[5] See http://nt2.uqam.ca/.
[6] See http://www.po-ex.net/.
[7] See http://www.litnet.uni-siegen.de/.
[8] See http://eliterature.org/cell/ and http://cellproject.net/.