Ryerson Centre for Digital Humanities

DRI, University Libraries and Digital Humanities Research Centres
Submitted to the New Digital Research Infrastructure Organization (NDRIO)
Call for White Papers on Canada's Future DRI Ecosystem

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In terms of serving digital humanities (DH) research, the challenge of a national digital research infrastructure (DRI), for the current Compute/Calcul Canada and CANARIE DRI and for a future DRI, is one of scale: for individual DH researchers and DH project teams, the DRI has often seemed too vast, too alien, too focused on types of services (e.g., High Performance Computing [HPC]) that are not especially relevant to what DH researchers need. From our perspective, this is where DH and similar research centres and university libraries can play a key role: **as a bridge and indeed as a key component of a national DRI**.

The Centre for Digital Humanities (CDH) at Ryerson University (https://www.ryerson.ca/cdh/), supported by the Faculty of Arts and Ryerson Library, plays a key role in incubating and sustaining DH research, in terms of both Ryerson-based DH projects and inter-university collaborations. The CDH works closely with Ryerson Library personnel to make resources such as technical expertise, hardware and software accessible to DH researchers. Because we are situated in a particular institutional structure and within particular networks of collaboration, any usable DRI will need to enhance and work seamlessly rather than interfere with these contexts.

What is most needed by DH researchers is access to, for new projects, a suite of services such as technical consultation, development servers, programming, and, for established projects, updating, maintenance, long-term preservation and access. DH researchers are not computer programmers or software engineers, and even if they obtain funds (e.g., grants) to purchase DRI and the temporary services of technical and other experts, these funds never cover the need for ongoing infrastructural updates and maintenance (which includes the personnel required to undertake the updating and maintenance). This is why DH researchers at some point approach units such as research centres and university libraries for support.

University Libraries play an integral role in building and sustaining digital research infrastructure across Canadian campuses. Given budget pressures and increasing demands, research libraries are often limited in the support they can offer: with more targeted access to a national DRI for DH, they could better support the work of research centres such as the CDH. Research centres such as the CDH, in turn, could facilitate the incubation of new projects and maintenance of established projects knowing they can access a robust DRI via their institution's library.

To return to the problem of the vast alienness of a national DRI for DH research, one solution would be for a national DRI to work with and develop its infrastructure in partnership with university libraries and research centres. It is much more realistic to expect that, initially, researchers will approach their university's research centre and library and work with them than to expect that they would first approach a national DRI office. This is not to say that such a centralized structure and the personnel that are a part of it should be done away with, not at all: they are indispensable for a viable DRI. But it would probably be more efficacious to have individual DH researchers and project teams use a national DRI *through or mediated by* the research centres and libraries and their personnel at their home intuitions, since these units can be much more agile and responsive to the unique needs of these researchers and projects. They are better placed to be able to assess how a national DRI *can be of use* for individual research projects, and to tailor the infrastructure support accordingly, so that DH researchers are not overwhelmed by the magnitude and complexity of the national DRI. Research centre and library personnel would be better placed to act as *translators* between researchers and a centralized DRI office. A national research cluster of research centres and libraries focused on DH could develop a suite of specialized services that a national DRI office could make accessible as well to researchers who do not have a DH research infrastructure at their institutions. Such an approach would also build on the existing network and collaborative relationships already in place across the DH research community and the research library network.

In summation, a national DRI should build upon and integrate and work with digital research infrastructures that already exist within universities in the form of research centres and libraries, which are best placed to able to respond to DH research infrastructure needs at a human scale, and to leverage a national DRI in a way that is most appropriate for the DH research taking place at their institutions.

The CDH also would like to note that it supports the recommendations presented in the white paper submitted by the Canadian Society of Digital Humanities / Société canadienne des humanités numériques, "Canada's Future DRI Ecosystem for Humanities & Social Sciences."

Ryerson's Chief Librarian, Carol Shepstone , reviewed a draft of this whote paper and provided feedback.