

# Perspectives and Challenges for Digital Humanities Centers and Laboratories

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## 1. Michael Sinatra (Université de Montréal): “Perspectives and Challenges for Digital Humanities Centers and Laboratories”

Neil Fraistat argued in Matthew K. Gold's 2012 collection of essays, *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, that “digital humanities centers are key sites for bridging the daunting gap between new technology and humanities scholars, serving as the crosswalks between cyberinfrastructure and users, where scholars learn how to introduce into their research computational methods, encoding practices, and tools and where users of digital resources can be transformed into producers”. How have Digital Humanities centers and laboratories evolved in the last decade, in particular after the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on activities on campuses? There are of course long-standing discussions about the purpose and role of DH centers (Fraistat 2012; Oiva / Pawlicka-Deger 2020), as well as work explicitly outside of centers (McGrail et al. 2022), and the best use of DH practitioners' time (Posner 2014). Our panel brings together speakers from different parts of the world (India, Switzerland, Canada, and the United States) who have all worked in a variety of DH centers and research groups. They will report on the ways these research spaces contribute to the design and development of research methods and tools that lead us to question the broader epistemological paradigms that underpin research. Indeed, rather than simply developing or using tools for the sole purpose of testing prior hypotheses (e.g., within the same disciplinary field), more and more Digital Humanities centers and laboratories place a central emphasis on the fact that the research questions, definitions and interpretations of our objects of study are intrinsically linked to the technologies through which we apprehend them. Researchers working within these centers thus aim not to separate practice (tool design, prototyping, development, etc.) from theory (creation of paradigms, identification of disciplinary issues, methodological orientation of research), but to think about them in context, taking into account geographical and institutional aspects, including how to integrate students (Christian-Lamb / Shrouf 2017), create labs (Pawlicka-Deger / Thomson 2023) and sustain centers (Tornatzky et al. 1998; Walters / Gray 1998). Finally, we consider how such practices differ in the Global South (Risam / Gairola 2019; Ray Murray / Hand 2015).

## 2. Nirmala Menon (Indian Institute of Technology Indore): “Building Digital Humanities in India”

The first research laboratory in Digital Humanities I led was initiated at IIT Indore in 2014. This was just my PhD students and I who put an A3 size paper with “Digital Humanities Lab” printed on it outside our sitting space. We published papers, did small projects, developed collaborations and then with a small group of DHers across the country formed the DH Association of India that is now an ADHO Constituent Organization (CO). As I mentored my students, I also felt the need to support and facilitate researchers across the country and in 2018 a colleague and I wrote a proposal to set up a Centre for Digital and Environmental Humanities at IIT Indore and submitted it to the Ministry of Education (MoE), Government of India. After four long years of presentations, questions, and revisions, the Centre was finally established in 2022. The J.P. Narayan National Centre of Excellence in the Humanities is now a reality (<https://jpnationalcentre.com/>). In the last year and half, we have had intense discussions and deliberations on the best ways forward for the Centre; we have supported more than 10 projects for young researchers across different institutions and we now have a draft for a new MA + PhD program in Digital and Environmental Humanities. We do not want this Centre to be just a place to fund our own projects but rather to be a hub to build an infrastructure for Digital Humanities in India and establish a template and an ecosystem to support DH in India. I will discuss some of the bureaucratic and practical challenges that we faced in this journey and some ways forward.

## 3. Martin Grandjean (Université de Lausanne): “NUCLEUS: From grassroots initiative to pillar of the digital infrastructure of a humanities faculty”

Contrary to the impression conveyed internationally by having co-hosted the Digital Humanities 2014 conference ten years ago, the institutional development of the digital humanities at the University of Lausanne has not been a smooth ride. After an inter-faculty dynamic with the Laboratory of Digital Humanities and Culture (LADHUL, bringing together the faculties of Arts, Social Sciences and Theology between 2013-2021), and an attempt at an inter-university approach with the UNIL-EPFL DhCenter (2018-2022), those concerned with digital methods in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Lausanne founded the NUCLEUS Center in 2022 (<http://www.unil.ch/nucleus>). While it partially fills the void left by previous structures, this bottom-up initiative is original in the landscape of digital humanities centers because its organization into “avatars” (i.e. highly specific poles of activity) quickly created a reverse dynamic: it is now the faculty structure that relies on these competence clusters by delegating certain missions to them. On a more local scale than previous initiatives, it's not just a meeting place like LADHUL, or an events hub like DhCenter. Indeed, the new center is responsible for the future revision of study plans aimed at highlighting and developing digital skills, and for managing the Faculty of Arts' own IT facilities, as well as, among other things, reflection on issues linked to generative artificial intelligence, digital publishing and the drafting of a charter for digital sobriety.

## 4. Melanie Conroy (University of Memphis): “Center versus Periphery: Flows between Networks, Projects and Centers”

Digital humanities centers, institutes, labs and consortiums have multiplied since the early 2000s and 2010s when many of the largest, best funded centers were founded (University of Maryland's MITH in 1999, University of Victoria's ETCL in 2004, Stanford's CESTA in 2012), as centerNet's database of DH centers documents (<https://dhcenternet.org/centers>). How much do these centers

constitute hubs of DH shape the discourses and power relations of DH? The centers that support or launched these projects are located mostly in the English-speaking world and this bias remains, despite the global spread of centers, institutes, and especially labs (Pawlicka-Deger 2020). In the centerNet and H-France data, we do see that incumbent institutional centers have integral places in networks of centers and that their partners join these clusters (Maron / Pickle 2014). Unsurprisingly, tracing these projects back to their sponsors and institutional supporters, we find many of the same funders (the Mellon Foundation, the NEH, CRSH/SSHRC, the Levehume Trust), along with regional sponsors and universities themselves. Many centers support projects that are allied in methods, topics, or other tendencies that replicate across DH networks. We also see universities who are less known for DH (Louisiana State University, Wellesley College, etc). Finally, we see some institutions that are not often represented in digital humanities narratives (St. Olaf, UMass Amherst, Nantes, etc) that nevertheless sponsor major projects, but these are few and far between. After explosive growth in the 2000s and 2010s, it would appear that much digital humanities research continues to be produced and circulated through many of the same well-established centers in North American universities. Indeed, many of those projects that started at universities with fewer resources have moved towards more established centers, showing that the gap between center and periphery has persisted through the expansion of digital humanities centers in North American academia.

## 5. Lena Krause and Emmanuel Château-Dutier (Université de Montréal): “Between Art History and Museums, Introducing L’Ouvroir”

*L’Ouvroir* is a Digital Art History and Museology lab at the Université de Montréal dedicated to support the work conducted within the framework of the Partnership “New Uses of Collections in Art Museums” (CIÉCO <https://www.cieco.co/>). This laboratory provides the entire team with state-of-the-art equipment to conduct research but also to experiment and develop new uses of digitized collections that use the web, 3D visualization techniques and virtual and augmented reality. It provides the opportunity to create a solid editorial infrastructure for the Digital Encyclopedia and to produce three computer developments that will be mobilized in the various axes of research: first, with the establishment of a collaborative platform for work on the archives; secondly, with the creation of a digital tool dedicated to the documentation of collection hangings; thirdly, with the creation of a JavaScript library designed to facilitate the production and deployment of digital exhibition devices and illustration of the Encyclopedia. It is also a versatile structure that facilitates collaborative work and the organization of teleconferences with the project’s museum and international partners. Its creation provides Canada with a research facility dedicated to the experimentation and development of innovations in the field of art history and digital museology. The laboratory positions itself at the interface between art history and museums by developing its expertise in three complementary areas: automated content analysis, the use of metadata, and the exploration of web publishing formats. Our team, which strongly mobilizes students, values experimentation, inclusion, and the development of autonomy.

## 6. Kristen Mapes (Michigan State University): “The Center among the Labs: Reimagining the Center Beyond Community Building”

Digital humanities work at Michigan State University (MSU) encompasses labs, scholarly communication infrastructure, and individual projects situated across several colleges and major units of campus. Digital Humanities at MSU (DH@MSU), while formally a center, works within this landscape to connect and foster DH work and people, rather than undertaking research projects itself. For many years, DH@MSU focused its activities on community building (e.g. brownbags, workshops, Slack, THATCamps, etc). Time and the pandemic have pushed us to reinvent what we do, however. Faculty and staff across our institution are over-extended, and with our unit entirely voluntary, we have seen engagement decline. Our position as a center that brings together people and projects allows us to focus on amplifying the work of scholars at our institution, identify opportunities for partnership, and advocate for improved resources and infrastructure. We see our most effective role moving forward as oriented around those activities rather than community building through activities/programming. The purpose of the DH Center varies by institution and must adapt to changing circumstances. By sharing the developing vision for DH@MSU, we want to make visible the labor behind efforts at community building. We also want to engage in open discussion about where to best place our energies to support colleagues engaged in projects and to foster onramps for others to join in.

## Appendix A

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