



[Digital Research] [services] in 21st Century - Leading Research, Teaching and Learning

MICAH VANDEGRIFT¹

1. Florida State University

Digital research and scholarship is an area of growth and investment for many libraries, and defined loosely at different institutions. In this job talk, I propose that digital research support be separated from “services” and that libraries must reimagine our role in the research landscape as we embark into this area. I close by suggesting that the adopting of a portfolio management model, proposed by Jen Vinopal at NYU, will serve to coordinize the future of digital research and digital services. The text is lightly edited to make sense outside a presentation format.

READ REVIEWS

WRITE A REVIEW

CORRESPONDENCE:

micahvandegrift@gmail.com

DATE RECEIVED:

April 25, 2016

DOI:

10.15200/winn.146230.06254

ARCHIVED:

May 03, 2016

KEYWORDS:

digital humanities, scholarly communication, job talk, meta-analysis, portfolio

CITATION:

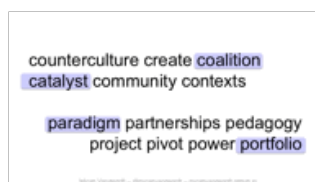
Micah Vandegrift, [Digital Research] [services] in 21st Century - Leading Research, Teaching and Learning, *The Winnower* 3:e146230.06254, 2016, DOI: 10.15200/winn.146230.06254

© Vandegrift This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and redistribution in any medium, provided that the original author and source are credited.



Digital scholarship broadly is an area of librarianship I am very passionate about. I'm passionate to see libraries play a crucial and central role in the future of higher education, as a hub for new methods, models and modes of scholarship.

I've subtitled my talk *Pivot from the PDF to the Portfolio* because that encompasses what I see as our particular current moment, and I think there are unique characteristics of libraries that could lead our field into that bright future.



These are a few of the words that have stuck in my head, as I've been entering the job market and thinking deeply about what it is that I enjoy about this work, and what it is that I think it important about digital research and services in the contemporary library. The highlighted words are of particular meaning to my talk today.



As you might have noticed on my opening slide, I'd like to break apart the concept of digital research from the concept of digital services. Don't worry, I'll tie it all in a nice bow at the end, but to me, it is imperative that we consider both of these separately in order to fully develop the libraries role in the digital future.

Digital Research (DR) in the 21st century is evolving at a very quick pace. What I have here is my sense of where we've been, and where we're going.



- traditionally DR had tools/materials focus -- pivot to training
- traditionally DR is doing projects -- pivot toward program building
- traditionally DR argued less yack, more hack -- pivot to argue about how we value digital labor and power dynamics in/across fields, and diversity of ideas, opinions and voices.
- Traditionally DR was about making things, but now its about building coalitions, community, and contexts

For example, hypothesis, an annotation tool, is leading a massive coalition, including JSTOR, HathiTrust, W3C, Duke U Press, and many more, with the goal to "standardize annotation as a unit of conversation built into the very fabric of the Web."

- DR has been underground, now is mainstream

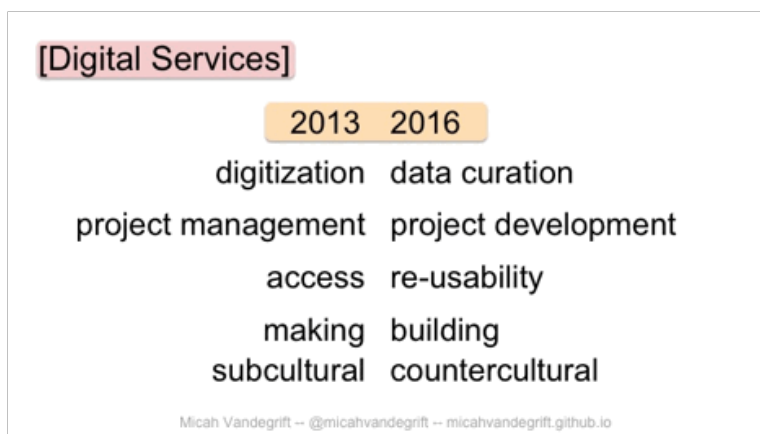
For example, the Modern Language Association (2012), American Historical Association (2015), and College Art Association (2016) have all issued guidelines for evaluating digital work



DR must be both micro (skills-based, local) and macro (project-based, countercultural). It should be **linked** (institution to institution – like a digital grad student exchange program), **open** (shared documentation, code, workflows via github), and **data-based**. Digital research must move from info literacy to digital literacy; info evaluation, tool utility, project development, dissemination, and interconnectivity. It is integrated into classrooms, labs, and study carrels. Overall, digital research must engage with, and impact, research and scholarship at many different points in the lifecycle of research.

Digital research is surrounding us, and establishing the library as a physical AND intellectual point to explore digitalness will have profound effects on how we are perceived and funded.

Let's turn to service(s).



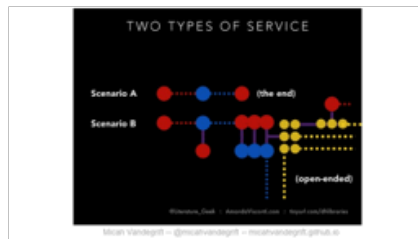
I produced a similar list here, because it's helpful to see how services have changed over time. And I think all of this is true of many libraries that are doing, or beginning to support digital work. But, I have a complicated relationship with what has been the guiding principle of librarianship as a "service profession." Because of my background (scholarly communication, digital scholarship), that has never been the crux of my work. So, I want to start way down there at the bottom, on **countercultural**.

For libraries to lead in Digital Research AND Service, we need to thoroughly examine what we mean when we say "service." The best part about this, is that I'm not the only one saying this --

Trevor Munoz, Assistant Dean for Digital Humanities Research at University of Maryland, wrote a seminal piece titled "Digital humanities in the library is not a service." Bethany Nowviskie, head of the Digital Library Federation, longtime champion of library-work on DH, writes about creating a culture of wild innovation, called "skunkworks," that is only possible if we reimagine ourselves as experts. She writes, "What if part of our obligation – part of the service libraries provided to the DH community – were: to experiment; to iterate; to assert our own intellectual and research agendas; to be just as bad at service as some of them are at being served?"

And then, just last week Amanda Visconti, Digital Humanities Specialist at Purdue Libraries, posted her job talk that got her that job, titled **Service +/- Collaboration for Digital Humanities in the Library**. And this is what she wrote:

We need to examine the “strategy and the *tactics* of a user-focused service ethic... combined with 1) the digital humanities commitment to collaboration, and 2) recognizing scholarship in all areas of professional practice.”



I was particularly inspired by this diagram that she produced to show a type of service that actually extends well into productive research/pedagogical partnerships.

What we have clung to in libraries is that if we have a service-orientation that means our labor must hinge around services. I'd argue that the ethics and principles of our profession (service, access) should evolve to be utilized as characteristics of our labor, not the embodiment of it.

What we do is good, solid, intellectually-engaged, analytical, productive research and scholarship, through the lens of service. Research in our 21st century library doesn't only mean providing labor to the assistance other people's research, but also advancing our own scholarly work and contributions to our fields of interest.

For libraries to lead in digital research and services, I believe we need to critically examine our organizational models:

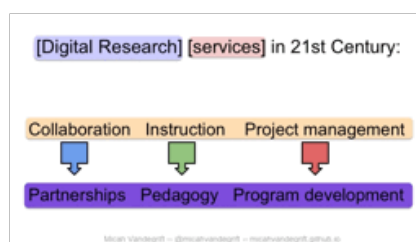
- are public “services”, technical “services”, special collections, reference and instruction useful in the same way they have been to our continued necessity on a research production-focused campus?

I'd like to propose that our profession would benefit from a pivot away from the service model to a portfolio management model.



What I am imaging as a future digital unit in a library looks something like this: active, deep support for digital research that is fed by and contributes to an active, deep program of digitally-focused services. Jen Vinopal, Head of Digital Scholarship Services at NYU, has called this Project Portfolio Management, writing that "if we're not properly planning, managing, and controlling the organization's work in the aggregate, we will have difficulty achieving our strategic goals." In my ideal scenario, this would be a mode of work that the entire library contributes to, but in reality I think it is much more common for a unit, or department to lead a long path toward something like this.

It is important to think beyond the PDF, but we also need to think beyond the project. What are the programmatic (strategic) decisions (directions) we could take? PORTFOLIO development, in my mind, is an all-encompassing strategy including some projects, feeding pedagogy, that create partnerships and ultimately inform and guide the path of a next generation library.



Traditional strengths of Research, Teaching, Learning become Partnerships, Pedagogy, and Project development.

In moving toward digitally-minded labor, libraries must move from countering the culture to creating the culture we want or need to exist within. I hope to be a catalyst for this shift in our field.