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Authors	O'Sullivan, James
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We need to talk about the digital humanities job

10-12 minutes

Dr James O'Sullivan, a lecturer in digital arts and humanities at University College Cork, explains why institutions need to think very carefully about the demarcation between public and digital humanities, because while they are related, they are not necessarily the same thing.

This is not a commentary on the definition, legitimacy, or future of digital humanities (DH) – there is already enough of that around. Rather, it is a treatment of one of the field's most significant yet elided aspects – jobs. Not just any job, not the tenure-track professorship wherein digital humanities is combined with an established discipline like literary studies or history; this is an exploration of 'the DH job'.

I refer to positions largely considered to be 'alt-ac' designed to support the development of DH within a particular institution. This is both a matter of pragmatics and ethics: the extent to which such roles align with existing frameworks needs to be fully appreciated if they are to benefit higher education, and we shouldn't be putting people in these positions until we've answered such questions.

So, what is the DH job? It is one that tasks its holder with 'supporting research and teaching in digital humanities'.

Essentially, it goes to someone who quickly becomes 'the DH person' called upon to do a lot of things, from teaching classes to advising colleagues on how to install WordPress (which in my book, isn't digital humanities).

The tasks assigned to an institution's post-holder can run the intellectual gauntlet, but a lot of time is spent explaining that, no, help with Twitter isn't really part of the purview. Now would be a good time to point out that I have held two such positions, and in both cases, I have nothing but positive things to say about my colleagues, and the institutions for which I worked. But I do speak from experience, and if your job is to support digital humanities, you're going to spend a lot of time explaining why you *can't* support something.

A common example would be web design. When faculty seek out a colleague who can help them with their DH activities, they often want someone who can make its work more accessible. Institutions need to think very carefully about the demarcation between public and digital humanities, because while they are related, they are not necessarily the same thing. This is particularly problematic at institutions that want to align with digital humanities because everybody else is doing it – these are the institutions where the aim is to produce *visible* scholarship, not visible *scholarship*. It is a peculiar situation when one must ask a string of seasoned professors, 'where is the scholarly value?'

Essentially, the digital humanities person is responsible for all things DH, but this is entirely dependent on the support systems already in place. At some universities, you will be able to point colleagues towards resources more suited to their requirements. At others, you might just have to do the

collegial thing and help them out with their social media.

But this is where collegiality becomes dangerous. At annual review time, the DH person might find it hard to articulate what's been keeping him or her busy. Those quick sit-downs to run through a platform and that one-to-one instruction and advice over lukewarm coffee adds up, but that time is often unaccounted for.

Six months into my first digital humanities job, it was clear that the bulk of my time had been spent being a good colleague, but a poor institutional resource. Supporting the individual is part of the broader agenda, but one must distinguish between activity which supports the institution as a whole, and that which satisfies a colleague who'd like to try something digital, but isn't committed in the long term to whatever that digital thing might be.

Most institutions want digital humanities, but only some know why, and even fewer have really thought about what it looks like in the context of their scholarship and teaching. There are places where 'capacity' relates to a concrete set of activities and processes to which the DH person will be contributing. But there are also institutions where 'building capacity' means, 'we don't really know what we want, we just know that we don't have it'.

I have a game I like to play with search committees when I interview for a job. I ask them for *their* understanding of digital humanities. You never get consensus, which is positive in some respects, but you often get such vague and tentative answers that you wonder if they have even heard of it before.

How is the person in role supposed to build capacity if the

institution doesn't know what it is they want to build? One could argue that this is the ideal scenario, as you can shape the agenda to suit your vision, but do we really want institutional capacity being guided by the perspective of someone, who, like everyone else, will be carrying preconceptions and assumptions forged by personal experiences and disciplinary biases?

One of the hardest parts of being the DH person is that you're often the Lone Ranger, deprived of a base department where you're surrounded by an intellectual community of peers. Faculty and staff must go somewhere, but while the colleague in the neighbouring office might be entirely amicable, the likelihood is that their interests will lie elsewhere.

The DH person cannot be all things to all people so they need to be based in the school or department where they can have the most impact and where their interests and expertise can best be utilised and nurtured. If that person comes from a literary studies background for example, it will not be long before they become dissatisfied with being cut-off from the English department.

Community is as much a social matter as it is an intellectual one. The repartee in the corridor, the chance meeting of minds, the sympathetic nod when an application is rejected, the last minute decision to go for a quick drink – these are the things that make people like where they work. Coupled with this risk of isolation is the need to avoid stepping on toes. Institutional desires to hire someone responsible for digital humanities tend to emerge from pre-existing curiosities and activities, meaning the new employee might be perceived as

a threat by colleagues. It is not nice being the hire who is viewed with suspicion.

Where the DH person should live will also tell you something about how their time should be occupied. This goes back to notions of success: if you hire a postdoc then freedom to pursue their own scholarship is essential otherwise, a lot of time will be spent contributing to projects which fail to excite, and disinterested parties make for the worst collaborators. The more they are required to step beyond their own interests, the more concerned they will become with future prospects – if the DH person wants to go back to that traditional teaching role, or at least, keep the option open, how much of their current position is going to be relevant to their next application? It doesn't matter if you're a literary scholar with expertise in text analysis, if all your publications are in history and sociology.

What are the prospects for someone who wants to stay in alt-ac? The DH job is usually a junior position, and as a role with no real antecedents in arts and humanities faculties, the avenues for career progression are not at all clear. Often fixed-term roles, what happens when the contract runs it course? In my experience, search committees for the DH job do not ask where you see yourself in five years – it's something they really don't want to consider. Will we start to see senior versions of the DH job emerge, or is the idea that capacity building will lead to new opportunities? Professionals need clearly defined paths for advancement or they will not see their job as a career.

Maybe this is a feasible model – with all that capacity building, maybe the need for 'a centre' will emerge, with the

logical step being that the DH person runs such a resource. But if that's the idea, then who should that person be? Should he or she be a scholar, a domain-specific expert who has advanced computational expertise, or a community builder whose scholarly expertise is less important than the ability to engage others? Perhaps the DH person should be a grant writer, because centres are expensive, or a project manager, capable of delivering digital projects and running a facility that would involve a considerable amount of development activities?

Ideally, the DH person would be all these things, a glorious amalgam that can single-handedly secure funding, execute the day-to-day administration of all that precious capacity, lead a team of humanities scholars and software developers, and maintain their own reputation as an international scholar. I don't know many people who satisfy all these requirements, and those that do, tend to like where they live.

The digital humanities job is a good thing. It creates a space for people who do not want that traditional role, and it allows institutions to build something. Whether that something has value depends on the ability of stakeholders to really think deeply about what it is that they want, why they want it, who can provide it, and how that person might remain professionally engaged and personally fulfilled.

Dr James O'Sullivan (@jamescosullivan) **lectures in digital arts and humanities at University College Cork. His work has been published in a variety of interdisciplinary journals, including *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, *Leonardo*, and *Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures*. He and Shawna Ross are the**

editors of *Reading Modernism with Machines* (2016). He is the author of several collections of poetry, including *Courting Katie* (2017), and the founding editor of New Binary Press. His writing has also appeared in *The Guardian* and *LA Review of Books*.