Information Services and the Humanities Scholar

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Thank you for inviting me, as a representative of the humanities faculty, to talk to you today about IS/IT issues and needs in our disciplines. My comments today represent observations made by my colleagues in the humanities as well as my own views as a professor whose interdisciplinary research agenda focusses on Russian intellectual history and culture.

Let me ease into my comments with some "anecdotal evidence" -- a conversation overheard just this week. Two faculty members were talking in the halls of Wescoe. One pointed out that she posts her student's grades on Blackboard so that they always know how they are doing, and the other responded that, if he put the grades up on the blackboard, then all the students would know each others' grades. True story.

Anecdotal evidence like this, I believe, results in humanities faculty being stereotypically known in the IS/IT "biz" as "The Luddites," but any sociologist or anthropologist will tell you that anecdotal evidence is misleading and often prejudiced. We do not have any anecdotal evidence about faculty who are sophisticated, high-end technology users, for example, because anecdotes are never about the norm; anecdotes are always about a deviation from the norm. And while we are talking stereotypes, let's also get rid of that ivory tower dream picture of the lonely scholar working by candlelight, surrounded by leather-bound tomes. While that image remains iconic for some reason, *news flash* -- my colleagues and I would not turn the grandfather clock back for anything. Mess with our electronic databases, the internet, desk top access and delivery, or Blackboard, and you die. The amount of time saved, the efficiency gained, the convenience (doing research on a Russian database at 2:00 am at home in your pajamas) -- are priceless to humanities researchers, who often have odd work hours.

In the university community, humanities scholars are their own fauna. Our research strategies and needs are very different from those of scientists. Our research is not necessarily on the cutting edge of the scientific future; most of it lies in the contemplative connection of past to present to potential future, and that means that we may need not only the latest article, but also the last two centuries of articles on our topic. And no publication or author ever becomes obsolete -- we are still reading Plato and Herodotus and Confucius and St. Augustine, and someone, somewhere, is writing an article on the ideologized view of Roman culture as

transmitted in Latin grammars used in German universities in the early 19th century (so don't throw those old grammars away!), or a book on the spiritual verses of northern Russian heretics late in the reign of Peter the Great. Most of those materials are not digitized (and may never be). Our materials base is vast, and it is unlikely that the entire base will be centrally available any time soon. And so we continue our work in small archives in tiny towns, in large state archives in big cities, and in research libraries and museums and institutes all over the world.

When we talk about humanities research, we must add "international" into our conversation. The humanities are not Americo-centric. Far from all of our material is in English or even held on the territory of the US. There is a good reason that some one third of all volumes held by KU libraries are in foreign languages. Out of every five articles I need for my own research, at least three will be in a foreign language; depending on my research topic, they may all be in a foreign language, and not just in one foreign language, but several. (Not much help there from J-STOR, much as we love it). It is not always possible to depend on resources prepared by foreign libraries, either, especially in countries where bibliographic control is spotty or does not meet American standards. The time when all of these research materials, many archival, others truly obscure (some deservedly so) or rare, are accessible in digital form is a long way away, and they may never be available. I confess I am annoyed when I read professional articles by monolingual IS personnel who tell me that "everything" is now available electronically and I don't need books. Like it or not, humanities faculty still need books.

Humanities scholars are aware that, because of the sheer amount of material involved, many digital humanities projects would not be cost effective. Who would pay? and why should they? What if the key piece of my research project is a twenty-page manuscript in an archive in Pskov with a use rate of once every 47 years? Bring on those digital scanners? I think not. Sending me to Pskov is going to be more cost-effective. (At this time, the archives in Pskov probably have no archival scanners of their own.)

The other thing every humanities scholar worries about is the scope of bibliographic access: what important item have I missed? how comprehensive is this database? is there some other database I haven't heard of or our library doesn't have access to? Are the major databases replicating the same items while other, less obvious items are "virtually" lost forever? How much material lies below the tip of the virtual iceberg? Far more than print media, virtual media leave humanities scholars feeling that there is so much to deal with that it is impossible to cover anything exhaustively, while at the same time, important resources seem easier to miss. How much easier it is to design, identify, and plan for cutting edge science research, where the body of relevant materials is significantly smaller than for the humanities (and soft social sciences) and where it is easier to anticipate potential need; how much easier to provide relevant materials to the sciences, which have a five year window of relevance (more or less), than to the humanities, which have an unlimited window of relevance.

Humanities researchers are often confused by some IS/IT processes. This is not to our honor,

but here is the stereotype working from the other side: We see IT personnel as techies, obsessed by platform, structure, methods of access, and speed of delivery, i.e., by the elegance of the design of the electronic platform, but much less concerned by content or the actual needs or disciplinary research strategies of the end user (patron, client, stake-holder). We humanities people, on the other hand, are interested in getting the content we need (without always having to travel to Boston or Berlin or Beijing or Bogota to do it), and we are concerned by the thoroughness of coverage. I'll be honest, if the article does not get to my desk top today or tomorrow or even next week, that's not an issue for me. I just want it to reach my desk, so that I don't have to find a way to reach Belgrade.

IS/IT librarians sometimes complain that humanities scholars do not take advantage of what is available for them digitally and electronically. They assume that humanities scholars are not sufficiently tech savvy or "modern." Well, sometimes scholars don't use particular resources because those resources are not useful for their research (and not because they don't know how to use them). On the other side of the negotiation, humanities scholars sometimes whine, when is the tech revolution in research libraries going to be about the humanities end user and our specific needs? Humanities scholars have been drawn up mountain sides in Greece to reach monastery archives and have traveled in smelly trains to uncomfortable provincial Russian cities to reach special libraries to get what they need. They have gone not only to London and Paris and Vienna, but also to Ulan-Bator and Dakar and Cuzco. They are willing to learn new technologies, for learning new technologies is much less onerous than finding a way to get one's hands on a particular resource. As is often the case, the real problem is a communication disconnect. You all are creating databases because you have the capacity, but it seems to us that you are not always interested in what our principal needs or preferred strategies are, especially now that the most important print form indices, catalogs, and reference works are available in vastly improved electronic format with golden bells and silver whistles (for which, by the way, we are profusely and deeply grateful).

No one has ever asked me what my priorities are in searching for and accessing research material or what kind of tools I would like to see available to me. I'm assuming someone somewhere out there got polled, but I never was, and neither were the colleagues I talk to. Now, it turns out that, although I am a humanities professor and by definition a "Luddite," I did do something about that. Brad Schaffner (whom some of you know; he is now the Slavic Librarian at Harvard) and I were co-PIs on a US Department of Education TICFIA grant project (TICFIA stands for Technological Innovation and Cooperation for Foreign Information Access). We started by talking to dozens of faculty in our field at various institutions, asking them: if they could have one new reference tool available, what would they like to see? And how should it work? What kind of information do they need to extract?

In response to their answers, we designed a project with EastView (a vendor that specializes in newspaper and journal databases for Russia, East Europe, and China, and has done done excellent database design) and with the Russian State Archive Administration in Moscow, to create a searchable digital database (search and browse; in Russian and LC transliteration) of

regional and national guides to the Russian Archives. These are hard to get, and some are available only at the archive. About 60 archive catalogs, both printed and handwritten, have been completed, and eventually 45 more will be available (for a total of 37,829 pages).   This digital database provides the most comprehensive access to the holdings of the entire Russian archive system in one simple, user-friendly electronic format. We get hits from all over the world, and hits increase month by month. I can sit down at my computer and get information in 20 minutes that once took an overseas trip and considerable in-country travel to achieve. Use is high and response is terrific, and I think it is because this was, from the ground up, scholar-designed, academic institution-based, and professionally IT-implemented. And it was done for about $250,000.

In conclusion: What do humanities scholars want from Information Services as research libraries reinvent themselves for the technological age? Well, we are realists.

> We know humanities faculty are not at the top of the institutional food chain. After all, we have to live and work in windowless Wescoe with sub-standard air circulation, and many of our classrooms are the dingiest and lowest-tech on campus.

> We know that the digitization of the entire intellectual output of terrestrial humanity over millennia is not going to happen in our lifetime. So we are still going to need books and libraries and archives, for a long time. Humanities faculty love their computers and access to so many useful resources and to improved services (for which we are, again, profoundly grateful), but the vast majority remain high-end book users. We hope you do not forget that in the budget planning and allocations and the rush to virtualize.

> We also know we are still going to have to travel to collections and archives to complete our research, and that's OK. Most of us enjoy traveling, and we have learned that travel is broadening. It is a good thing we know those foreign languages.

But we would like to see IS/IT (not just at KU, but collaboratively and internationally) work toward centralization in one particular sphere that is very important to humanities researchers everywhere -- and that is journal access. Our collective humanities dream (for which it *must* be possible to develop external funding, national and international) is a comprehensive digital repository of journals, with a single point of access, that will allow retrospective access to any journal, no matter how obscure; from any country, no matter how distant; in any language, using no matter what alphabet; from any time period, no matter how long ago. It's a great national, international, and collaborative project.

And it would be really good if that digital repository were *not* controlled by Elsevier.