Humanities researchers and digital technologies: Building infrastructures for a new age

November 2 2011

Europe's leading scientists have pledged to embrace and expand the role of technology in the Humanities. In a Science Policy Briefing released today by the European Science Foundation (ESF), they argue that without Research Infrastructures (RIs) such as archives, libraries, academies, museums and galleries, significant strands of Humanities research would not be possible. By drawing on a number of case studies, the report demonstrates that digital RIs offer Humanities scholars new and productive ways to explore old questions and develop new ones.

According to Professor Claudine Moulin, lead scientist and Chair of the ESF Science Policy Briefing editorial group: "Making our cultural heritage accessible in digital form, and interlinking it sensitively with other resources, opens a new frontier for Humanities research for addressing grand challenges in the Humanities themselves, and at the interface with other research domains."

The report argues that while there are many sophisticated RIs in other domains of science that can inform and further Humanities research, ultimately, it is also necessary for Humanities scholars to build and have access to 'fit for purpose' Humanities RIs, given the nature of their data sets, research methods and working practices.

Despite the advancements of recent decades, some Humanities researchers have been reluctant to realise and acknowledge the

advantages that the application of [computing technology](#) to Humanities can bring. In order to attract a new generation of Humanities researchers to carry out such work, a number of ongoing problems need to be addressed. According to the Science Policy Briefing, these include the development of a language of common understanding between the computing and non-computing Humanities, the lack of appropriate funding models for such projects, as well as the institutional and professional transformations that are needed to underpin such work.

Professor Milena Žic Fuchs, Chair of the Standing Committee for the Humanities at the ESF, comments: "Digital infrastructures are developing rapidly but unevenly, and there is an urgent need for coordination, standardisation and sharing of experience to prevent unnecessary duplication and the atomisation of good initiatives. This Science Policy Briefing identifies already pressing and future needs by focusing on current developments and initiatives, with the aim of bringing to the fore intellectual challenges rather than mainly technical or funding issues."

The report's focus in on developing a common strategy on RIs in the Humanities at a European level; it identifies seven key areas of priorities and future research directions.

1. State of the art and needs: current research activities and future needs; partnerships across communities and institutions; RI ecosystems where multiple levels of RIs can co-exist and collaborate; higher education programmes.
2. Physical and digital RIs: challenges of, and potential solutions for, integrating physical and digital RIs; interdisciplinary communicators.
3. Strategic directions: facilitating research beyond mono-disciplinary interests and cross-fertilisation between the

Humanities and other sciences; integration of isolated project-based data and resources to facilitate interpretation; identification and promotion of good practices for interoperability, usability and collection curation within, and across, national boundaries; focus on open access policy; sustainability.

4. Partnerships and networking: productive alliances across communities and institutions based on equality; identification of current obstacles; private sector involvement; network dimension.

5. Academic recognition: working towards a culture of academic recognition of RI work; interdisciplinary tools and teams; targeted advocacy.

6. Dissemination and outreach: emergence of a new culture that looks beyond established academic circles; demonstration and dissemination of scholarly results; models of good community of practice.

7. Evaluation of RIs: evaluation systems; economic and social benefits; interdisciplinary contributions; recognition and credit to foster and promote a new generation of young researchers to take on the challenges.

Aimed at researchers and information professionals, as well as the institutions which make decisions of importance to them , such as funding bodies, those responsible for management and administration of research organisations and RIs, selection and promotion committees, the Science Policy Briefing is the result of the work of ESF's Standing Committee for the Humanities and its Expert Group on RIs, over the last two years, with input from members of different communities involved in the Humanities RIs as well as from leading experts in the field.

  More information: The Science Policy Briefing 'Research Infrastructures in the Digital Humanities' is available online at

www.esf.org/publications.html.

Provided by European Science Foundation