Making Sense of Digital Humanities: A Conversation Starter

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What is Digital Humanities?

Digital Scholarship allows research areas to be investigated in new ways, using new tools, leading to new discoveries and analysis to generate new understanding.

- Adam Farquhar, Head of Digital Scholarship, British Library

Digital Humanities is a cover term for a wide variety of activities that attempt to explore and expand areas of knowledge typically examined in the Humanities by developing and/or applying computational tools or methods in ways best suited for these areas.

Digital Humanities is also a cover term for a supporting community of practitioners who share a common interest in the tools and methods--and challenges--generated by the activities of Digital Humanities scholars, as well as potentially useful activities in fields outside the traditional Humanities.

- Scott Kleinman, California State University

We use "digital humanities" as an umbrella term for a number of different activities that surround technology and humanities scholarship. Under the digital humanities rubric, I would include topics like open access to materials, intellectual property rights, tool development, digital libraries, data mining, born-digital preservation, multimedia publication, visualization, GIS, digital reconstruction, study of the impact of technology on numerous fields, technology for teaching and learning, sustainability models, and many others.

- Brett Bobley, NEH, United States (2011)

History of Digital Humanities

Digital Humanities is much older than one thinks.

It was previously known as Human Computing. Pioneers in the Field include Padre Roberto Busa (considered the Father of Digital Humanities) and English Professor Josephine Miles.
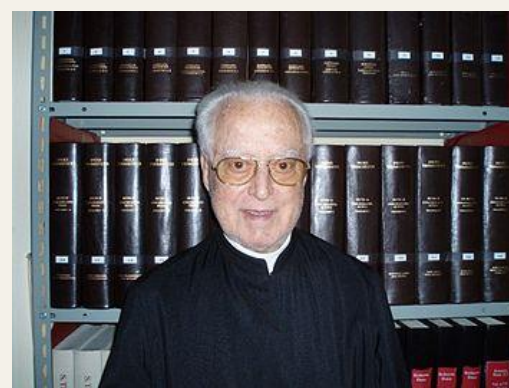
From 1946 Padre Busa worked on a concordance of the works of St Thomas Aquinas, transferring the texts to punch cards and in collaboration with IBM, a concordance programme was written. The first printed volume (of 56 volumes) was published in 1974, then published on a CD-ROM in 1992, followed by the web.
The project lasted 30 years.

In the 1950s, Josephine Miles and her team from the University of California in Berkeley worked on a concordance to the Poetical Works of John Dryden also using punch cards and computers. The concordance was published in 1957.
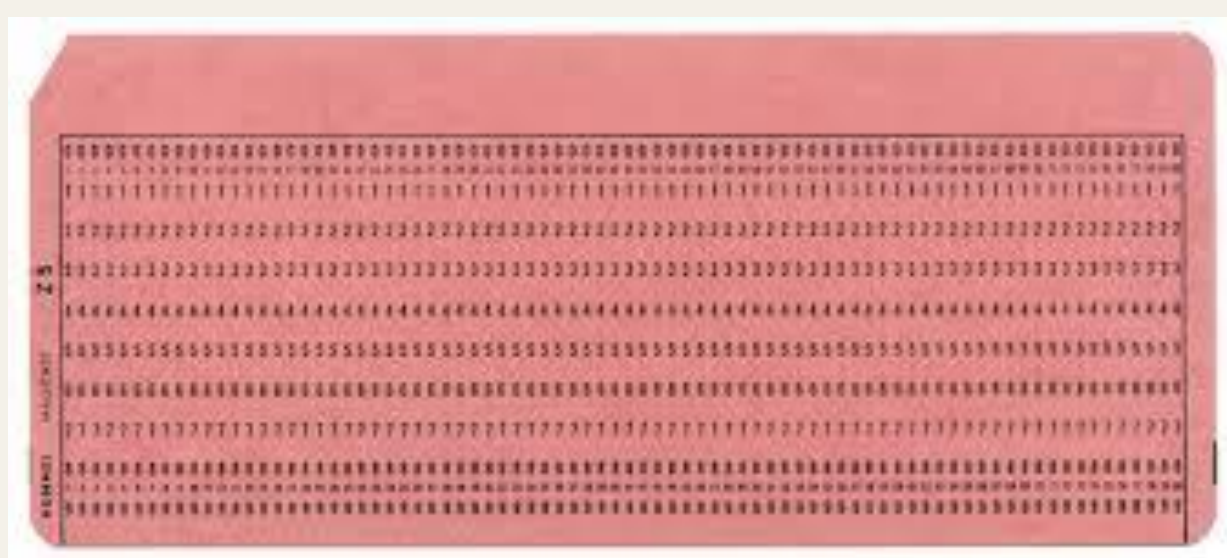
Other scholars followed, using mainframe computers to automate tasks such as word-searches, sorting, counting instead of doing this manually.
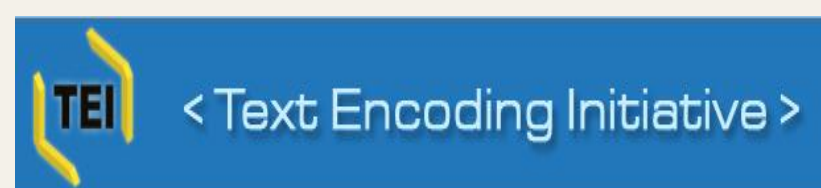
With developments in applying computational methods to humanities, the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) was developed and launched in 1987 with the full version of the TEI Guidelines appearing in May 1994, leading to Extensible Markup Language (XML), which is a tag scheme for digital editing. There were also experiments with databases and hypertextual editing.

The term "Digital Humanities' only became part of the academic vocabulary in 2004 when editors Schreibman, Unsworth and Siemens, authors of "A companion to Digital Humanities" called it that, in an effort to prevent the field from being viewed as digitisation.

Institutional Approaches to Digital Humanities

Approaches vary from institution to institution, with some having Digital Humanities centres or hubs on campus, or Digital Humanities centres in libraries (e.g. Scholars' Lab at the University of Virginia).

Role of Librarians and Library Support

Digital Humanities provides librarians new and innovative opportunities to collaborate with scholars and *to support research, teaching and scholarship.*

Libraries have resources i.e. content, expertise and technology as well as skills that can be brought together for Digital Humanities projects.

These resources and skills include digitisation, making digitised text searchable, creating and editing videos, creating websites and digital exhibits, in other words, transforming traditional physical collections into digital projects.

Our libraries already include people who are "fluent" in many aspects of Digital Humanities such as subject/liaison/reference librarians, cataloguers and technology experts.
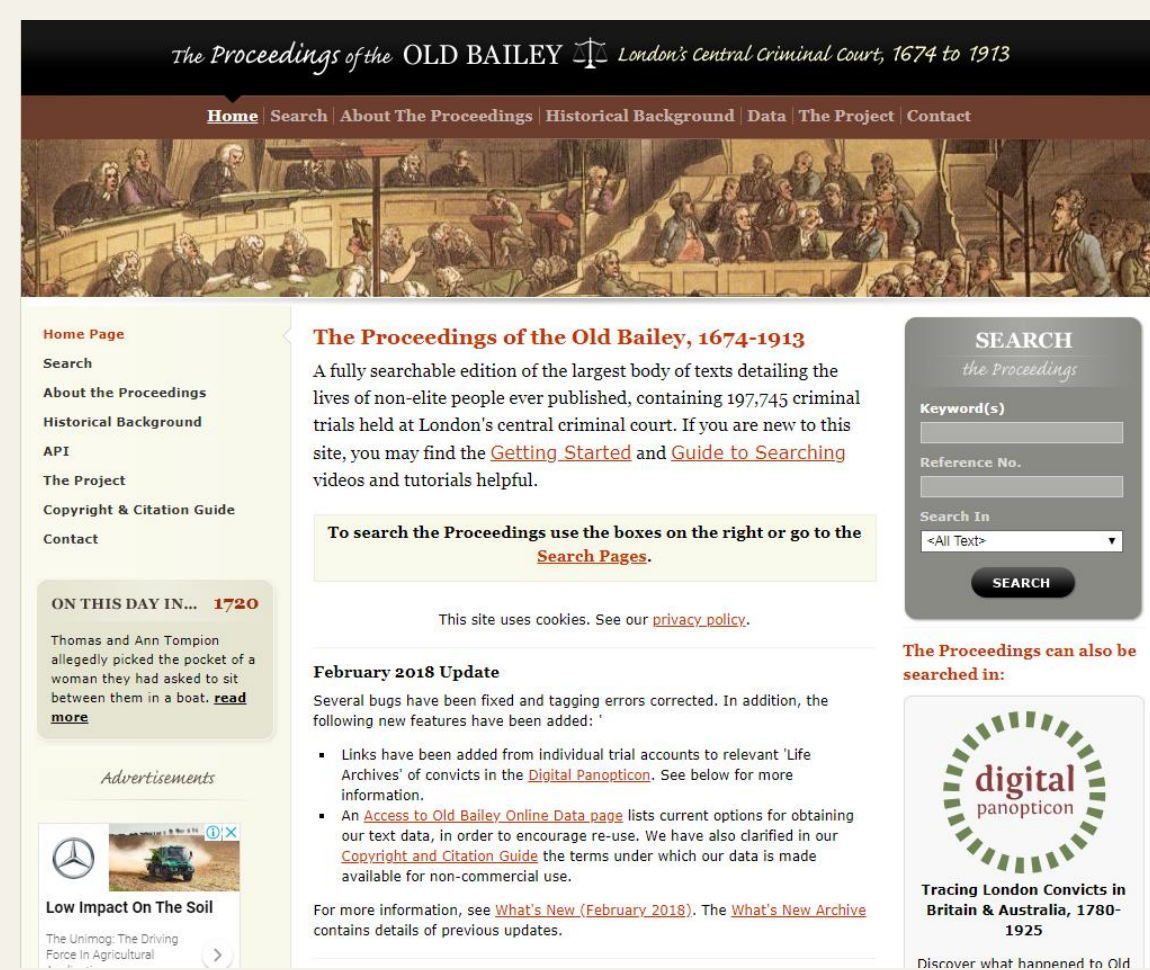
We are already involved through some of these:

- support of aspects of the research lifecycle;
- digitization and digital preservation;
- making our digital content available and discoverable;
- making dedicated spaces available like Makerspaces;
- Research Data Management and hosting of research data
- purchase and hosting of licensed online content and making it available;
- GIS;
- Electronic Theses & Dissertations;
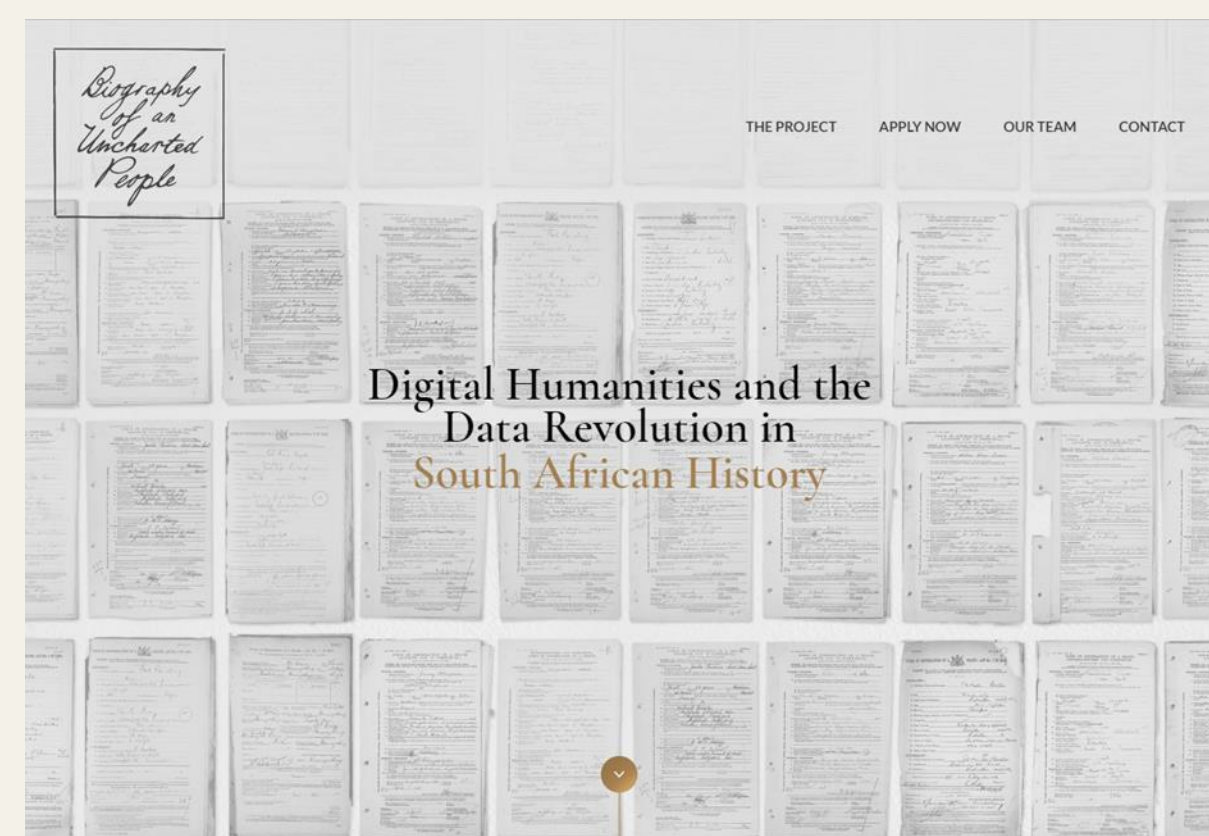- publishing and promotion of Open Access.

Digital Humanities Projects

There are thousands of Digital Humanities projects, ranging from small-scale ones with limited or no funding to large-scale ones with multi-year financial support.
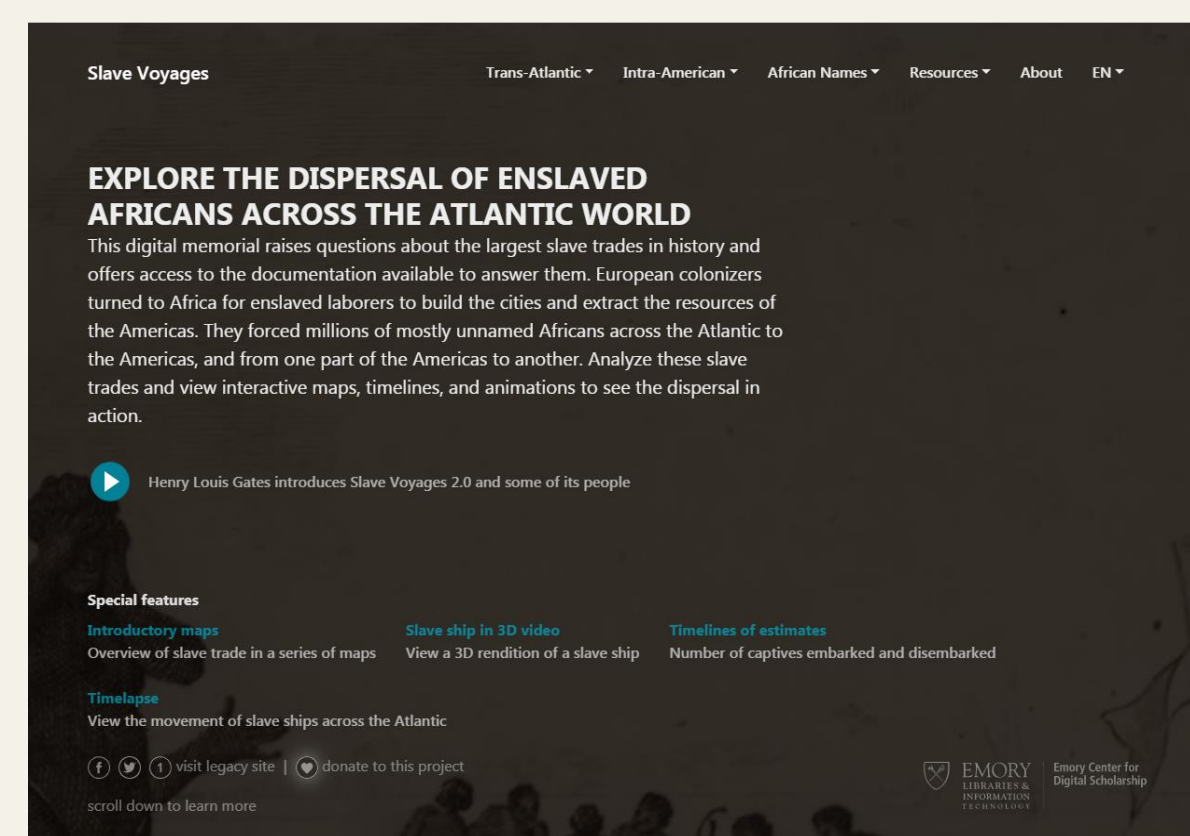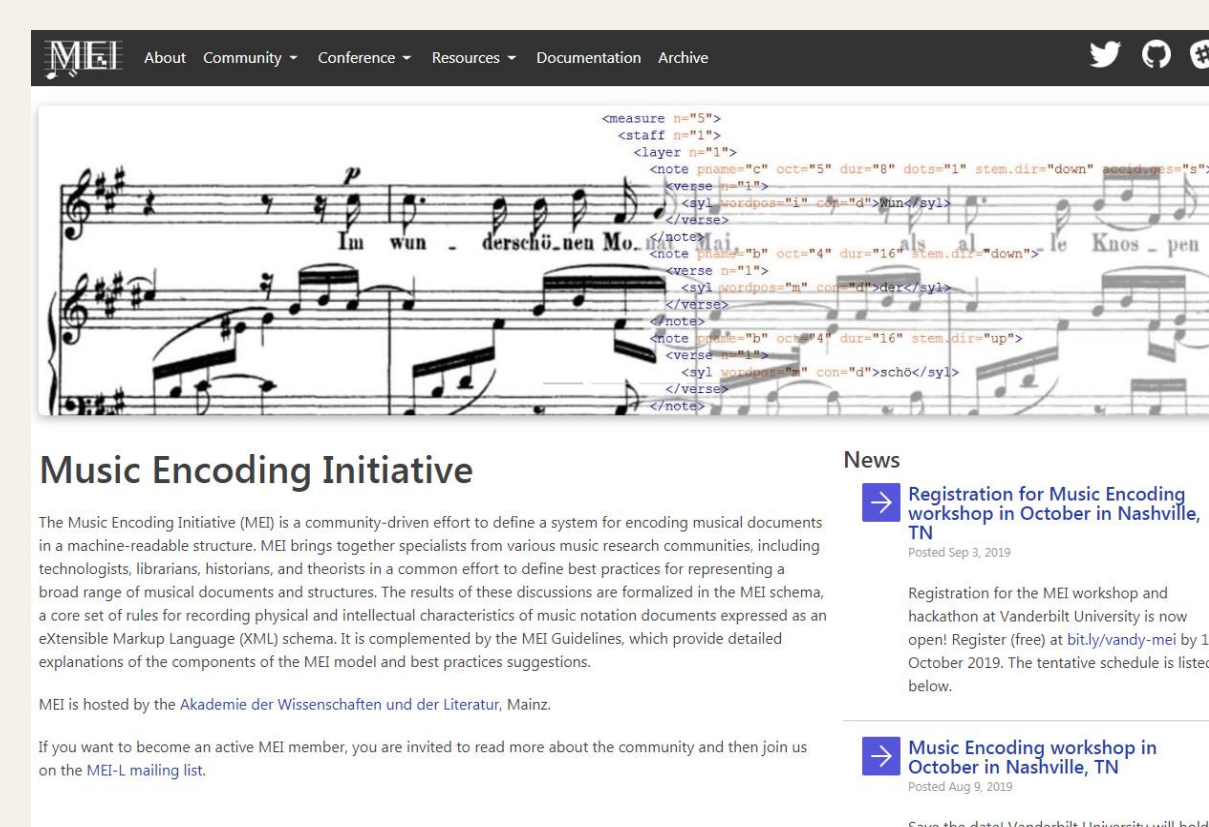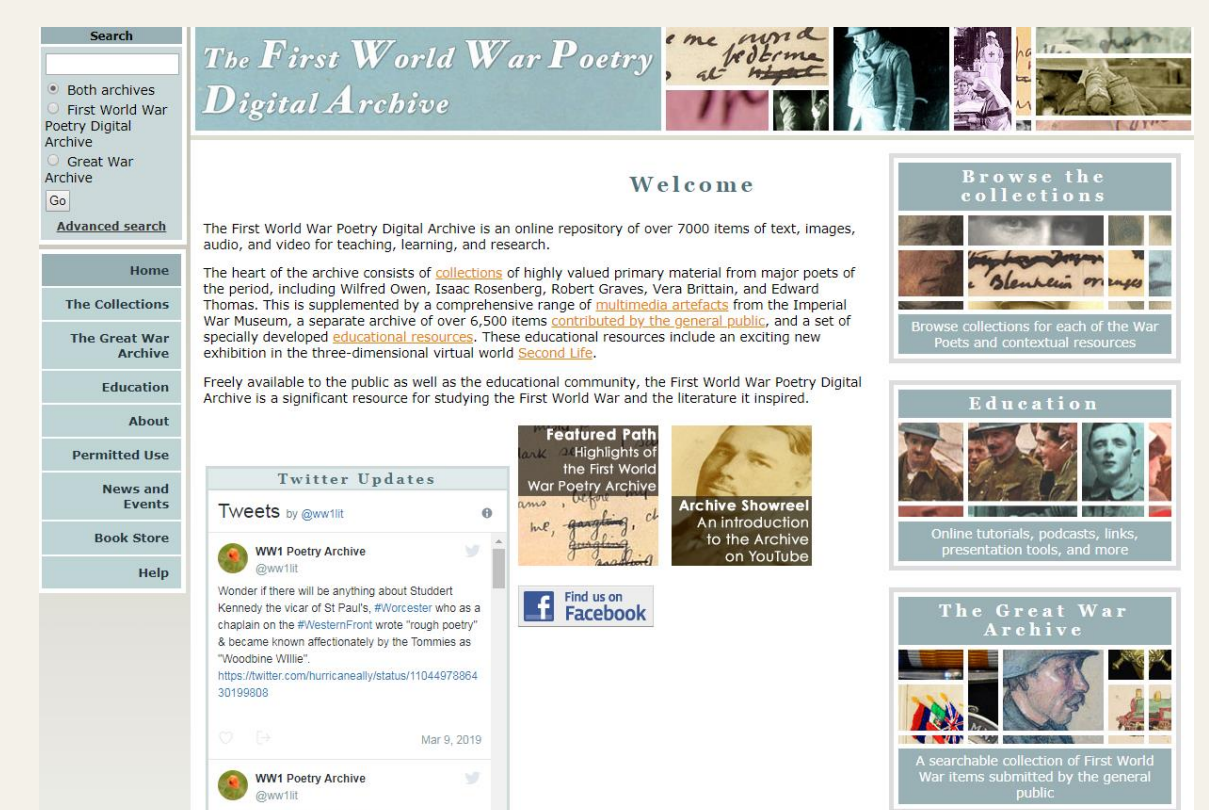
Here are some examples:

https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/

https://unchartedpeople.org/

https://www.slavevoyages.org/

https://frda.stanford.edu/

https://music-encoding.org/

http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/

Further Reading