

A New Empiricism: Does Changing Resources Change Research?

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With the ongoing growth of digital projects and collections in libraries, there has been a concomitant growth in the digital data available to researchers of all kinds. While the hard and social sciences are accustomed to working with such large data sets, this digital explosion has created something new for the humanities. By virtue of necessity, those disciplines which make up the humanities have historically had research paradigms that involve very small and specific amounts of information and tend towards interpretive, rather than empirical, methods. But with these new resources, what empirical opportunities are open to the humanities? How might this change the nature of humanities research itself and why should that matter to the library?

Both librarians and scholars have been engaged in these issues, but often from different perspectives. While librarians must place digital projects within institutional priorities and larger best practices, humanities scholars must engage with their own discipline-specific standards and methods. Many digital projects are, of course, the outcome of collaboration between the library and the humanities. A fuller understanding, however, of the end use and users of these projects would inform not only on such collaborations but on the shape these collaborations should take in the future.

This paper seeks to examine the claims of emerging empiricism in the humanities through a case study in the discipline of musicology. Musicology provides a strong case study for several reasons. First, direct interaction with primary sources continues to be emphasized within musicological research paradigms and this emphasis has made musicologists eager and early adopters of digital projects and resources. Secondly, since musicology encompasses not only strictly musical questions, but also issues of sociology, history, gender and literature, musicologists may make use of all types of digital resources. Thirdly, there are significant international projects between libraries, archives and other repositories (such as the *Répertoire International de Sources Musicales*) that are specifically designed to provide these sources to musical researchers. Finally, musicology as a discipline has been and is currently engaged in ongoing discussion about what constitutes research in the profession, what research questions are viable and what solutions are credible.

In order to quantify changing practices, this paper compares the bibliographic citations of Ph.D. dissertations in musicology completed between 2004 and 2009. It analyses the use of digital, print and manuscript sources and charts chronological trends over these five years to see how the use and function of digital resources is evolving. It compares these results to discussions in both musicology and general humanities literature regarding the nature and benefits of empiricism and its relationship to the library. How do these findings justify the cost of detailed and extensive digital resources? How dependent is and should such research be on the preservation and maintenance of such resources?

Drawing from these discussions, the paper makes several assertions about the role of the academic library in this new research. First, it suggests that digital projects are increasingly important to the scholarly community and that they are important in evolving ways. Second, it discusses what place physical interaction with primary sources maintains in this new research. Finally, it invites an ongoing discussion between interpretation and empiricism, proposing that the relationship between researcher, librarian and resources is not only influenced by change but a catalyst for change itself.