

Luddites or Critics? Designing Useful Digital Resources for Humanities Scholars

Claire Warwick

Director, UCL Centre for Digital Humanities

Reader in Digital Humanities

UCL Department of Information Studies

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dh>

Things we think we know about humanities scholars

- Humanities scholars are Luddites
- Lack of knowledge is responsible for lack of use
- Users don't really know what they need
 - Thus...they need training
- Give them something good and they should use it
- They love books and libraries
- They hate technology, don't understand it, can't use it

Things we do know

- Range, nature, and chronology of information needs very diverse
 - Physical as well as digital
 - Thus a challenge for libraries and publishers
- Different information seeking techniques from scientists
 - Chaining, browsing and berry picking
 - Less keyword searching
 - Not well supported by current information systems

Lack of knowledge

- If training is all that's needed, why hasn't it worked yet?
- Humanities users don't like training,
 - don't have time
 - don't like to admit ignorance
- The other Google generation...

They ought to use good resources

- But they don't
- Unless resources are designed for them
 - Not for the convenience of publishers
 - Not for the preferences of librarians
 - (eg Librarians and publishers like advanced search, users almost never use it)
- If they don't like resources, they will not use them

They don't know what they need

- Know exactly what they need from digital resources
 - And from printed ones
 - Trusted brands and imprimatur
 - Information about extent of resources, selection methods, authority of creators
- Visceral sense of what looks 'right'
- Purpose and how to use it must be obvious
- Don't know or care about Z39.50 or Counter

They love books and hate computers

- They have very clear, complex models of information environments
 - Both physical and digital
- Understand affordances of both
 - This helps explain lack of adoption of e-books
- Complex reading is predominant research method
- Affect and emotion vital in interaction with information resources
- But no simple correlation between books = good and computer = bad

They value libraries

- True, even if not completely physical now
- Previous research (LAIRAH project, 2005) found that the university library web page was the most valuable digital resource for humanities scholars
- We will test this in forthcoming study (RIN-HIP)

So how to proceed?

- We must (all!) continue to study these users
 - Take views seriously
 - Use them as a basis for design of new resources
- Good to see that this is being done outside UCL
- Project Bamboo, DARIAH
- Individual projects like NINES
- But all digital resource creation projects should do this
 - And this is by no means accepted

How to study humanities users (UCL version)

- Vital to do so from beginning of project
 - Not just to drive late changes
 - Then retest and take results seriously
 - People will support what they help to create
- Use in context of real work
 - Not in a lab, and initially not with set tasks
- Use of quantitative data, what people really do
 - Not what they say they might do

UCL user studies

- Take into account affect
 - Recognise that cognition alone is not sufficient when we make choices about information resources
- Understand reading (especially complex reading)
 - Main method of humanities scholars
 - Yet we understand too little about how it fits into information behaviour
- If users don't want it, don't create it
 - Unless you enjoy wasting time and money

And...

- Never believe a humanities scholar who calls him/herself a luddite
- They are often the most thoughtful critics
- Thus a helpful source of information for good design