

Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Religious Studies Scholars at Tufts

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Introduction

This project is the result of a series of interviews conducted with faculty in Religion and related disciplines at Tufts during the spring of 2016. The data analyzed here will also form part of a broader meta-analysis done by Ithaka S + R researcher Danielle Cooper with input from approximately two dozen schools nationwide. Programs selected for interviews include secular schools like Tufts, as well as seminaries, and variously affiliated schools across a wide variety of faiths and cultural backgrounds.

The small size of the local sample, five interviews, makes generalization a dubious proposition. Nonetheless, this snapshot of attitudes and approaches is a useful window on how these scholars do their work and think about it. The methods used here may also serve as a model for future studies of Tufts faculty and students.

Context

User studies are a common form of library research. Librarian-researchers have used them as a way to better understand user needs, to model the research process and to plan more effective collections and services. Some focus on age groups or particular tools, or particular aspects of the research process. This study is modeled on previous work done by researchers at Ithaka S + R, specifically these three reports:

- [Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Art History Scholars](#) (2014)
- [Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Chemists](#) (2013)
- [Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Historians](#) (2012)

Methods

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with five faculty members in religious studies and allied disciplines at Tufts. Four interviews were conducted in the faculty member's campus office, the last via Skype.

The project is governed by a protocol agreed to by the Tufts IRB. Interviews were semi-structured, and designed to encourage open-ended responses about research methods and publication strategies. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and all personally identifying information removed. Analysis was done on the basis of anonymized transcripts. Pseudonyms will be used to refer to the interview subjects.

Qualitative analysis of the transcripts was done in several stages to identify themes, as well as opportunities for immediate and longer-term follow-up by the library.

The questions asked address four main topic areas: the focus of the scholar's research, the methods used, the means used to publish it, and the challenges and opportunities facing the field. [Appendix]

Analysis

Research Focus

Research interests cover a wide range of time periods and faiths, including early and modern Christianity, early Buddhism, medieval Islam, and ancient Greek mythology and religion.

All describe themselves as scholars rather than practitioners of the religions they teach.

Their work is highly interdisciplinary. The five scholars mentioned eleven disciplines in describing their work and interests: American Studies, anthropology, art history, classics, comparative literature, economics, geology, history (mostly intellectual and social), philology, religious studies, sociology. The most categorical expression of this was by Bud, but all mentioned several disciplines and/or theoretical approaches in discussing their current and past work.

"In my research and also in my teaching I am pretty emphatic that I think that disciplinary boundaries are nonsense and are really there as institutional guides to figure out who pays for the Xerox machine...." (Bud)

Research Methods

Print culture and tools, like the arrangement of the library, are still used by all. Some (Emilia) take marginal notes; others (Bud and Carlotta) use the arrangement of the library as one way to find new materials. Carlotta sees hybrid print/digital research as inevitable.

"I try to put everything in my computer whenever possible, but it's very hard in classics, because of the nature of a lot of the things we deal with. We still have materials that are in very old books. You just can't escape that." (Carlotta)

Each scholar has assembled a personal collection of research materials, some from personal purchases, some from interlibrary loan, some from the open web, some constructed as part of the work. Many of these collections are thematic ones—and the themes are not necessarily ones which would be called out by a library or database classification scheme.

"I'll look up a particular word in Paul and will start a file with all of the instances in which he uses that particular word. I'll print out the first lines and

the four lines after so I have a little bit of the Greek context. Then I'll do another TLG search with other authors who use that word in the context which they use that word, and then I match them.” (Daniel)

“...the file on my computer is just called On The Problem of Looking. Every time I stumble across a reference to somebody in antiquity looking at something they're not supposed to see and then being slapped with divine retribution for it, I open that file and just make a note.” (Daniel)

“I have a very large directory called "Sources for dissertation". I organized that by the names of the characters, but also in broader folders where I was thinking about the different aspects about the sea that are examples of that.... I have a folder on purification, which includes a variety of figures, characters, anecdotes from ancient sources.” (Carlotta)

Digital tools are essential to the work of all of these scholars, each in a different way. For Carlotta and Daniel, the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG) offers a comprehensiveness of search. Several use online book collections like Google Books and the Internet Archive, or collections of primary texts like ctext.org. For some projects, they are enough by themselves.

Digital tools are tools, with their own quirks. Carlotta notes that some produce different results from their print counterparts. Aletta mentions archival databases which she has difficulty determining the scope of, or tools like Worldcat, which are not set up to solve the problems she has in mind. And of course, digital tools bring digital distractions.

Q: How do you locate these materials [for your research]?

A: *l'année philologique*. I do use the online interface now. I used to be forbidden by my professors in Montreal. I am very familiar with the books, but moving to the online interface has been good, although you cannot find the same things. It is not fully equivalent.... You find different stuff using different incarnations of the same resource. (Carlotta)

“Obviously word processing is great. Accessing all my files and not having to type all my footnotes individually is great, but the fact that...with the click of a mouse my typewriter can also turn into the New York Times, that also can be a huge distraction.” (Emilia)

Keeping up with trends is a concern for all, and increasingly difficult as the amount of available information increases.

Q: How do you keep up with trends in your field?

A: "It's hard. I always assume that there's about 60 percent of it that I'm missing, so I live with great anxiety most of the time." (Bud)

"Is this going to be recorded?" [Laughter] (Aletta)

Within a narrow niche it is possible to know everyone working on what you are (Emilia), but as interests expand that becomes less possible. Aletta and Bud expressed actual anxiety, but concerns about this were mentioned by all five subjects. The informal exchange of papers scholars have always done (see the [Stanford Republic of Letters](#) project) has evolved to include a variety of social tools, as well as the in-person conferences which were previously the only way to personally interact with non-local scholars with similar interests. Academia.edu and Facebook (and blogs and text message groups) also seem to be operating for scholarly publishing in the way that Facebook and Twitter do for other sorts of media: readers use the social platforms as ways to bring together an array of material related to their interests in one place.

"Probably the best thing for me has been Academia.edu. What I do is I follow prominent scholars in all the fields I'm interested in. Every time they bookmark something or every time they upload something, I get an email alert." (Bud)

"The other thing is that what people frequently do... most people I know, everything that gets published is up on their Academia page pretty quickly. So in the end, it doesn't really matter which journal you've published with." (Emilia)

Research data in the humanities is varied and sometimes complex. Bud keeps a database of Buddhist scripture with indications of the audience for it; Aletta has, with library help, created a searchable archive of a Christian charitable organization's major publication; Carlotta keeps thematic notes on myths of the sea, and helps her students create databases of translations and of sentence diagrams; Daniel has a file of notes on divine retribution related to looking.

This data is mostly kept locally, sometimes with Tufts help for backup and storage.

Making this data more widely available presents interesting challenges. Emilia and Daniel comment that their notes are designed to be useful and meaningful to themselves, and that publishing them might not be helpful to anyone else. Carlotta has data related to poetic analysis which would be useful to publish, but her wish list for what it would include covers some things current publishers and libraries are struggling with:

“Hopefully a publication dealing with that would include very granular data. It would include the tree bank data but also the metrical analysis, so that you can run scripts on it and everybody is free to see the results for themselves.” (Carlotta)

“At a conference I gave a talk about my Buddhist Brahman data. Then I put the PowerPoint on Academia for that lecture. Then I put the database, or at least part of the database, online.... It's on Academia.edu so you can download it and check to see if I'm right.” (Bud)

Humanist research has historically relied and relies on the broad distribution of primary and secondary texts in book form, in libraries, to allow for reproducibility of results. As humanists work in different formats, libraries will need to build new tools to manage them. In the case of these two examples, work libraries are doing to support the sciences and social sciences may offer useful examples.

Publication Practices

Publishing choices are overwhelmingly governed by concerns about tenure requirements. Even Carlotta, who publishes a great deal of her work as open-source/ open-access, has a conventional publication profile of books and articles. All have published the books, chapters, and articles which are the customary expectation. All publish through scholarly publishers.

Challenges and Opportunities for the Field

Aletta and Carlotta see justifying the study of the humanities in the current higher education climate as a crucial challenge.

“Where do classics and religious studies fit in the curriculum that it provides students with the opportunity to explore the discipline but also the opportunity to use those skills in the marketplace?” (Carlotta)

“One of the things I think we all in the field could do better with students is to say.... You want to come to Tufts and major in economics or political science? So do hundreds of other kids. Do that, but also minor in religion. That way you can actually have some useful skills for understanding the world we live in, and an employer will go “Oh, that’s interesting. You’re slightly different from the 500 other economics majors.”” (Aletta)

Daniel and Emilia see the split between practitioners and scholars in religious studies as an ongoing concern.

“The field is kind of split between people who love religion and want to take care of it and talk about how wonderful it is and what religion can do...and people who want to look at it critically.” (Daniel)

“...as a scholar, what is your relationship to the material you're studying?” (Emilia)

“It would be helpful if the field could be understood as two different fields, but everybody goes to the same conference. A lot of people walk away frustrated and disappointed.” (Daniel)

Mass digitization projects like Google Books are a major opportunity for discovery, providing a tool scholars have never previously had.

“...the biggest thing for me is digital stuff. I wanted to find out the earliest reference to yogis in medieval European literature.... because of Google Books I had come up with something from 1609 in Spanish. I found it because I could do a word search of this huge Spanish text from 1609. That's amazing. There's no way I would have found that just going to a library and flipping through a card catalog.” (Bud)

Daniel sees changing perspectives and access to materials as a key change in the discipline.

“There are opportunities in what I do, because for a long time the only people writing about ancient Christianity were theologians....there's just a world that's opened up with stuff you can do with this ancient material when you re-contextualize it in the Roman Empire.”

Magic Spells

Q: If you had a magic wand to help you with your research, what would you want it to do?

Aletta would like to digitize all of the microfilm she depends on, and to restore a range of archival materials which have been discarded over time. Bud would like a research leave with no travel, and a consultant on statistics. Carlotta would like to be able to search in an organized way across all of her digital and print media. Daniel would like a research assistant at the library to do the time-consuming parts of working with the physical collection. Emilia would like an Internet-free zone, a comfortable spot to work on research.

“I want to recapture all of the things that have been thrown away.... things that people think aren't going to matter.... Things that are considered ephemera.” (Aletta)

“Then there’s the problem that so much of the stuff that’s been preserved to date is on microfilm, which is painful and not categorized. The Christian Herald...that Tisch preserved is not perfect, but you can keyword search.” (Aletta)

“Having information technology be something that I could go and have a conversation with somebody with--that would be nice. I don't know what's out there.” (Bud)

“...it’d be cool to sit down and talk to somebody else about what’s possible—and somebody who won’t be freaked out by the fact they’re talking to somebody who’s in religion.” (Bud)

“...a way to organize these sources in a way that makes sense and that is preservable.” (Carlotta)

“I would want some kind of student or graduate student position at the library. Then I could just send a list of books and the student would go pull them....” (Daniel)

“...having a room without Internet access someplace where I could try to convene a writing group once a week, where people could just write without distraction and with the camaraderie of people in the room, maybe a box of Dunkin Donuts coffee or something, that would be useful” (Emilia)

Library Opportunities

Realism about the library's role in discovery of research materials is important. Not all research starts or ends with the library's collections. Working from material the scholar personally owns is often convenient or essential. It is not practical for one library to support every possible research subject comprehensively. The systems of libraries locally and nationally are quietly very important—interlibrary loan is a particularly critical service. There is gratitude for library collections and services in each of the interviews. Libraries are an essential tool for these scholars, but one among many.

The addition of new means of discovery, like Academia.edu, might trouble publishers but should not trouble libraries.

The sheer quantity of information available online and elsewhere opens up new opportunities, but also makes it harder to have a sense for the work of a whole discipline. It is possible to know personally all of the people working in a small

specialty area, but not necessarily all of the people with relevant tools and approaches. Table of Contents services are an old, old library service, so this need for help in keeping up is not new. But there is also an opportunity for libraries in connecting scholars to tools and approaches they might not have considered.

Academia.edu, as well as services like [PhilPapers](#), are addressing a real need for more relevant tools for discovery. They are services that publishers have no incentive to provide, and that are not quite in scope for libraries to provide. The single search box at Tisch does a good job of pulling in all of our article and book material, but it is not designed to filter away the large proportion of our collection which is not useful to a given scholar's research. Academic affiliation has always been a social network, so allowing users to pick a set of scholars to follow is an extremely useful feature. Also, it stands outside the library's electronic structure and its hundreds of separate database silos. Most of the silos are based on publisher, rather than discipline, so tracking a single scholar's entire output across a library's collection is surprisingly challenging. Disciplinary indexes like l'Année Philologique and ATLA do filter to specific disciplines...but without Academia.edu's addition of full-text for the articles in question, and with the social component obscured in favor of search.

Having said that, it is relevant to stress that new services are additive rather than subtractive. They supplement existing means of research, and new requirements for support build on existing ones. Interlibrary loan has been mentioned. Several of the scholars have had library instruction sessions for their classes, or referred students to a librarian. Librarian support for faculty research is understood and appreciated, if not always taken advantage of. Library digitization has helped Aletta solve a problem of access to a critical resource, and preservation of it as well. The collection, and the organization of it, were praised both as resources and as discovery tools.

Q: Is there anything else that you could use in the way of research support, or anything else I should know?

A: It just keeps getting better. Even before I wish for something, something happens. (Bud)

Summary and Conclusion

The five Tufts scholars interviewed have fully integrated digital tools into their research process, but print tools and sources continue to be important as well. Each assembles a collection of research material to address their interests through a combination of online access, personal purchase, library use, interlibrary loan, and their own interpretation and analysis. Keeping up with trends in the field is a challenge for all, but solutions to this problem usually revolve around other scholars rather than tools: in addition to conferences, each has also assembled a different personal set of electronic means of keeping in touch with other scholars and their

work. Publication strategies are customary for the discipline, and largely dictated by tenure and promotion requirements. Time and attention are the chief personal challenge. The scholars raise and respond to broader questions about the nature of the discipline and its relation to the contemporary university, but their current work continues, with new tools and skills added to their repertoires.

Appendix: Questions

Research focus

- Describe your current research focus. Describe how your research is situated within the academy.

Research methods

- What theoretical approaches does your research utilize or rely on?
- What research methods do you currently use to conduct your research (i.e. discourse analysis, historical analysis, etc.)?
 - Does your research produce data? If so, what kinds of data does your research typically produce?
 - How and where do you currently keep this data?
 - Where do plan to store this data in the long term?
- What kinds of sources does your research depend on?
 - How do you locate these materials?
- Think back to a past or ongoing research project where you faced challenges in the process of conducting the research.
 - Describe these challenges.
 - What could have been done to mitigate these challenges?
- How do you keep up with trends in your field more broadly?
- If I gave you a magic wand that could help you with your research process - what would you ask it to do?

Dissemination Practices

- Where do you typically publish your research in terms of the kinds of publications and disciplines? How do your publishing practices relate to those typical to your discipline?
 - Beyond scholarly publishing are there any other venues that you disseminate your research?
- Have you ever deposited your data or final research products in a repository?
- If so, which repositories and what has been your motivations for depositing?
- If no, why not?

State of the Field

- From your perspective what are the greatest challenges and opportunities currently facing religious studies and/or theology studies?

Follow-up

- Is there anything else about your research support needs that you think it is important for me to know that was not covered in the previous questions?