The rapid growth of technology and its increased sophistication have greatly aided many areas of study in the humanities field. However, the boom in digital humanities has also sharply demonstrated the need of professionals to manage and curate these now-vast quantities of information. An article from Digital Humanities Quarterly quotes a doctoral student: “Something as simple as constructing my maps of related concepts are not easily applied to primary sources in digital libraries. So what use are digital libraries, if all they do is put digitally unusable information on the web?” (Borgman, 2009). Borgman goes on to explain that this complaint “is more about digital collections, which often lack basic capabilities for retrieval or analysis,” while the term libraries “implies the existence of tools, services, and a library imprimatur of cataloging” (2009). This level of frustration arising from a lack of librarianship in digital humanities underscores the importance of libraries’ involvement in this field.

Sadly, the field itself does not always recognize this importance. The British Library and the National Library of the Netherlands both have extensive digital holdings of cultural and historic value, but they learned that for a library unconnected to a university, “a place . . . in the Digital Humanities landscape is not as naturally formed” (Conteh, 2014). Their information is for the community, for the public, for everyone—yet a poster session showcasing their resources, asking “Where do you need us?” aptly demonstrates the loss to the digital humanities field as they miss resources, information, and opportunities to collaborate.

Other scholars are spreading the word about the myriad resources available, such as Jones’ comments on the New York Public Library’s digital content, describing “a surge of digital information from all corners of the world,” and speculating on potential contributions to digital humanities (2016, p. 16). Some national libraries act as professional archiving institutions, preserving online web material of cultural value (Brügger, 2016). Brügger’s article also comments on many of the difficulties facing digital humanities: “Since the heterogeneous, messy and opaque nature of the web archive is an inherent part . . . there are no easy solutions [. . .] However, this should not leave the humanities scholar paralysed, because one of the most important tools in the traditional humanities toolbox is the skill of dealing with sources and their provenance. These skills just have to be reinterpreted and translated to fit a new digital environment” (2016). Who better than librarians to do that job? Indeed, Borgman refers to the library as “a laboratory for the humanities, but not the only laboratory” (2009). She encourages humanists to partner with both libraries and information technology groups, and she urges them to “think together” about the common challenges” that they face (Borgman, 2009). Teamwork is essential.

The accompanying infographic explores this call to action through a visual medium. In it, I examine the exciting opportunities that humanist studies and community partnerships can bring. The infographic bridges theory and practice in two main ways. First, it takes a careful look at the nature of digital humanities and the role that libraries can play. Such partnerships would help not only the libraries, but also the communities they serve. Second, the infographic examines a specific example of one of these partnerships, as a library joined forces with a cultural archive to preserve artifacts for posterity. The future may be difficult to predict, but the collaboration between humanists and librarians opens the door to a greater wealth of knowledge than ever.
References


