

# The LAIRAH project: Research on the use of digital humanities information resources

Claire Warwick

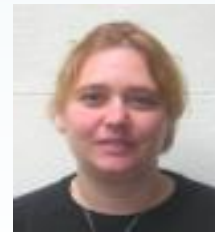
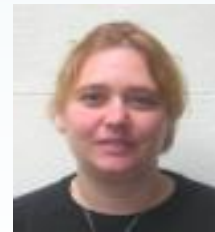
Department of Information Studies

University College London

[www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/circah/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/circah/)

# The LAIRAH team

- Dr Claire Warwick (PI)
- Dr Melissa Terras (Co-I)
- Paul Huntington  
(Research Fellow, CIBER)
- Nikoleta Pappa (Research  
Fellow)
- Isabel Galina (PhD  
Student researcher)



## The LAIRAH project

- Aim: to investigate the use of online digital resources in the humanities to determine whether they are sustainable and, how, and why they are used

## Objectives, to determine:

- Actual use levels of different resources, using deep log analysis.
- Whether certain characteristics (disciplinary associations) or media (text, images) have an impact on use.
- The impact of institutional features such as departmental experts, internal culture, funding and management.
- The effect of user consultation about design on eventual resource usage.
- Whether neglected digital resources can be reused effectively if potential users are (re)introduced to them.

# Funding and background

- Funded by UK Arts and Humanities Research Council ICT Strategy scheme
- 15 month project- reported end September 2006
- First survey of actual usage levels based on quantitative log data

## Methods: Quantitative

- Analysis of web server data for Higher Education Portal sites
  - AHDS, Artefact and Humbul
- To determine which resources users link to
- Comparison to questionnaire mounted on these sites
- Survey of links to digital humanities materials from library and departmental pages

## Methods: Qualitative

- Case study of 25 selected well-used projects in different disciplines
- Interviews with producers of resources
- Study of documentation if any
- Workshop with AHRC Methods network on neglected resources

## Sample log file

```
66.XXX.XXX.XX - - [24/Feb/2005:00:07:12 +0000]  
"GET/deposit/depintro.htm HTTP/1.1" 200 318  
http://ahds.ac.uk/copyrightfaq.htm
```

- (66.XXX.XXX.XX) IP (Internet protocol) address.
  - anonymous machine-to-machine address used by computers to send and receive data over the internet.
- (24/Feb/2005:00:07:12 +0000) date stamp
- (GET /deposit/depintro.htm) file sent to client and directories where file is stored on server.
- (HTTP/1.1) hypertext version used between server and client.
- (200) status field, states if request was correct and file was sent
- (318) size in bytes of file
- (<http://ahds.ac.uk/copyrightfaq.htm>) referrer log: address of last site visited by client.

## Why use web log analysis?

- Server logs- automatic record of accesses to web server
  - How many times files are accessed
  - Which machines access them
  - From which domain or type of ISP
- A record of what users actually do
  - Not what they say they do, or mean to do
- Like all methods there are limitations though

## Findings- Log analysis

- Logs surprisingly hard to access
- Relatively low levels of use
  - Many resources entirely neglected
  - About 30% appear entirely unused
- Importance of names and content
  - Witches and other educated persons
- Emphasis on creation not reuse

## Findings- Log analysis

- Great diversity of resources used
- Importance of services- journals, research centres
- Information resources- libraries, archives
  - Digital and physical
  - University library most used resource
  - Librarians' judgment on resources trusted

## Findings – Questionnaire

- Enthusiastic adoption of digital resources
- Use of generic information and reference resources dominates- eg Online DNB
  - Confirms log data findings
- Lack of concern with documentation and archiving
- Split between resource creators and re-users

## LAIRAH Workshop findings

- Users very aware of quality issues
- Interface and content
  - Value trusted brands
  - Judge academic resources by comparison to commercial ones
- Want information about:
  - Selection methods
  - Sources- footnotes
  - Subject matter
  - How to use resource

## Barriers to access

- Easily discouraged, especially by access or interface problems
  - Downloading content
  - Learning new functionality
- Quick to abandon and distrust digital resources

## Vital resources

- Willing to be persistent if a resource is vital
  - Does not excuse poor quality resources!
- Willing to try various search strategies
- Broad vs deep usage
  - Danger of electronic cannon formation
  - How to assess and fund this?

# Characteristics of Successful projects

- Disciplinary support for digital resources
  - Institutional prestige and approval
- Dissemination of information
- Documentation variable to non-existent
  - Good in disciplines that value this in research
    - Archaeology and Archives
  - Very hard to access from websites

## Remaining areas of concern

- Very little formal user testing
  - One of the few that did so exceptionally well regarded
- Serious problems of sustainability
  - Resources archived but few updated or maintained

## Recommendations- producers

- Logs must be made available
- Producers must be aware of how demanding users are of digital resource quality
- Barriers to access must be avoided
- Careful thought given to interface design
- Naming of resource vital
- Documentation about provenance, extent and selection needed

## Recommendations- Funders

- Broadly used resources must be distinguished from pure research
- Provision for small research communities
  - Avoidance of electronic cannon formation
- Librarians need proper training in Digital Humanities resources
  - Physical information resources vital and must be funded as such

## What have we learnt?

- Actual evidence about use of digital resources in humanities
  - Based on quantitative log data
- Reference and Information resources dominate
- Users are demanding and sure of their needs
- Complex, multiple requirements for successful digital resources

## What have we learnt?

- Digital Resources must fit into established research culture
  - Subsequent work on Archaeologists on VERA project proved this
- Researchers unwilling to learn new techniques
  - Digital enthusiasts have tried to encourage this- and failed!
- Resources that do not suit user needs will usually be rejected

## Subsequent CIRCAh research

- VERA- Virtual Environments for Research in Archaeology
  - Archaeologists and their use of a VRE and IT during excavation
- INKE – Implementing New Knowledge Environments
  - online reading environments and users in humanities
- LinkSphere
- -humanities users of Web 2.0 and VREs for research