

# Building the Humanities Lab: Scholarly Practices in Virtual Research Environments

## van den Heuvel, Charles

charles.vandenheuvel@vks.knaw.nl  
AlfaLab (Royal Netherlands Academy for Arts and Sciences), Amsterdam, Netherlands;  
Virtual Knowledge Studio for Humanities and Social Sciences, Amsterdam, Netherlands

## Antonijevic, Smiljana

smiljana.antonijevic@vks.knaw.nl  
AlfaLab (Royal Netherlands Academy for Arts and Sciences), Amsterdam, Netherlands;  
Virtual Knowledge Studio for Humanities and Social Sciences, Amsterdam, Netherlands

## Blanke, Tobias

tobias.blanke@kcl.ac.uk  
King's College London

## Bodenhamer, David

intu100@iupui.edu  
Polis Center, Indianapolis, USA

## Jannidis, Fotis

fotis.jannidis@uni-wuerzburg.de  
University of Wuerzburg, Germany

## Nowvieskie, Bethany

bpn2f@eservices.virginia.edu  
University of Virginia Scholars' Lab, USA

## Rockwell, Geoffrey

geoffrey.rockwell@ualberta.ca  
University of Alberta, Canada

## van Zundert, Joris

joris.van.zundert@huygensinstituut.knaw.nl  
AlfaLab (Royal Netherlands Academy for Arts and Sciences), Amsterdam, Netherlands;  
Huygens Institute, Netherlands

of scholarship" in the humanities and social sciences (as compared to the natural sciences) as one of the explanations why researchers in these knowledge domains might be hesitant in using the web and other digital resources for their research.<sup>1</sup> Before pointing to these researchers however, we may want to question first of all the infrastructures and tools offered to those researchers. Tools and services will only be taken up if they truly *serve* researchers in their daily work. Infrastructures and tools offered to humanities scholars should support concepts and approaches specific to scholarly practices in humanities research, and, to that end, the ACLS commission advocates "working in new ways" by "tools that facilitate collaboration; an infrastructure for authorship that supports remixing, re-contextualization, and commentary—in sum, tools that turn access into *insight and interpretation*. [emphasis in original]" (ACLS, p. 16).

Recently we have seen an increase of virtual laboratories, which use virtual research environments (VREs) to facilitate collaboration among researchers and to promote innovative use of tools and sources in humanities research.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, although traditionally operating as sites of knowledge production in the natural sciences, laboratories have started to develop into loci of scholarly practice in the humanities too. This shift has also been reflected in funding agencies' support to online laboratory settings; their (re-) allocation of financial resources is fed by expectations that more researchers will become involved in digital and computational humanities, and that the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in humanities research will lead to new research questions, methodologies, and ways of collaborating. However, it is not evident that the lab analogy can be transmigrated seamlessly from a science field into the humanities.

Thus far, there has been little critical reflection on such lab initiatives, although the use of VREs in the humanities certainly requires and merits scholars' attention. Now that a number of such large scale initiatives have developed, there is an opportunity to reflect on what these VREs have achieved and to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses for humanities research, as well as to explore ways in which they should further develop. Therefore this

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## 1. Subject

*Our Cultural Commonwealth*, a report of the American Council of Learned Societies' Commission on Cyber Infrastructure for Humanities and Social Sciences, (ACLS 2006) mentioned the relative "conservative culture

panel addresses theoretical, epistemological, hermeneutical and strategic questions emerging from the use of VREs in digital and computational humanities in general, and in humanities research of text and image in particular. It brings together representatives of scholarly institutions developing virtual labs, infrastructures, and tools to advance the study of text and image in humanities research. The panel focuses on humanities labs promoting new scholarly practices in VREs, and within this broader framework it concentrates on the following specific themes:

- the benefits, challenges and obstacles of research practices emerging from humanities research in virtual research environments.
- the specificities of generating, analyzing and sharing linguistic and visual data in online laboratory settings.
- the advantages and barriers of scholarly collaboration across disciplinary and geographic spans.
- the main features of institutional and funding policies needed for further development of digital humanities labs.
- technical models potentially driving future development of local initiatives.

## 2. Organization of the panel

The research and development team of AlfaLab<sup>4</sup>—a digital humanities initiative of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW)— is the initiator and organizer of this panel. Panel members include humanities researchers from KNAW; Digital Research and Scholarship and Scholarly Communication Institute at the University of Virginia Library;<sup>5</sup> POLIS and Virtual Center on the Spatial Humanities;<sup>6</sup> TextGRID;<sup>7</sup> DARIAH;<sup>8</sup> and the Text Analysis Portal for Research (TAPoR).<sup>9</sup> The panelists are engaged in the study and development of six different humanities labs dealing with text and image analyses, which grants this panel a unique opportunity to comparatively explore various strategies in building and using humanities labs, and to reflect on both theoretical and practical concerns of that process. In addition, the panel will critically evaluate—from the researchers' perspective—the focal themes listed above, and

it will address actions that might be taken to improve the use of VREs in humanities research.

The panel session will be organized in the following way:

- The panel chair will introduce the main topic, discussion questions, and the panelists; duration: 3 minutes;
- Each of the panelists will give a short presentation (6 minutes), followed by questions from the audience (4 minutes); duration: 60 minutes;
- The themes and questions raised in the presentations will be further discussed in an open forum between the panelists and the audience; duration: 25 minutes;
- The panel chair will briefly reflect on future plans, provide contact information, and close the panel.

Panelists:

- Dr. Tobias Blanke, King's College London discussing DARIAH
- Dr. David Bodenhamer, Director Polis Center discussing the Virtual Center on the Spatial Humanities
- Prof. Dr. Fotis Janidis: University of Wuerzburg (Germany) discussing TextGRID
- Dr. Bethany Nowviskie, Director Digital Research and Scholarship and Associate Director Scholarly Communication Institute at the University of Virginia Library - discussing NINES
- Dr. Geoffrey Rockwell, University of Alberta TAPoR
- Joris van Zundert (MA): Department of Software R&D at the Huygens Institute, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences - project leader AlfaLab, discussing AlfaLab

## 3. Moderators:

- Dr. Charles van den Heuvel (panel chair)
- Dr. Smiljana Antonijevic Virtual Knowledge Studio (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences)

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## Notes

1. <http://www.acls.org/cyberinfrastructure/OurCulturalCommonwealth.pdf>
2. [http://mith.umd.edu/tools/?page\\_id=60](http://mith.umd.edu/tools/?page_id=60)
3. <http://www.educause.edu/Resources/UnderstandingInfrastructureDyn/154606>
4. <http://alfalablog.knaw.nl/>
5. <http://nines.org/>
6. <http://www.polis.iupui.edu/>
7. <http://www.textgrid.de/en.html>
8. <http://www.dariah.eu/>
9. <http://portal.tapor.ca/>