

JISC and NEH Transatlantic Digitisation Collaboration Grants

Overview

April 2008



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

JISC and the US National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) have joined forces to foster collaborative digitisation projects between the UK and the USA. JISC involvement in this transatlantic scheme is part of the wider International Partnership of Research Excellence (IPRE). Part of this work was to investigate the research benefits that could be gained from establishing closer links between US and UK scholars via digitisation.¹ The NEH had been given a similar impetus to move forward with such collaboration following the publication of the American Council for Learned Societies' Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences.² Announcements made in April 2008 on the value of US-UK research by the UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown highlighted the importance of this particular transatlantic work.

British and American universities should cooperate 'at a far higher level' than they currently do

UK Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP

JISC and the NEH were also well aware that developments in digitisation and digital research demanded international collaboration. Neither the internet nor its users restrict themselves to physical borders; therefore collections, expertise

and tools would all benefit from collaboration between scholars and related parties on either side of the Atlantic.

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The initial call highlighted key digitisation activities including:³

- Methods to rejoin, 'split' humanities collections detailing suitable transatlantic standards and communication strategies
- Pilot to test infrastructure and procedures
- Creating a virtual archive or resource
- Articulating how collaboration between US and English digitisation efforts might function
- Comparing the needs of researchers in both the US and England and their uses of digitised primary resources

The JISC and NEH grant program encourages international collaboration on humanities projects of value to scholars worldwide

Bruce Cole NEH Chairman

¹ www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/UK-US-Academic-Collaboration/GarethRobertsIPoREx.pdf

² www.acls.org/cyberinfrastructure/cyber.htm

³ As JISC funding for this stream was received from HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England), funding on the UK side was restricted to higher education institutions in England.

The programme expected to fund three digitisation projects; however, having been impressed by the quality of the proposals this was expanded to five digitisation projects awarding total funding of around £600,000 (\$1,180,800)

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Projects

The projects began work in April 2008 and are due to finish in March 2009. The grants awarded were:

The St Kitts-Nevis Digital Archaeology Initiative (Southampton University/Thomas Jefferson Foundation)

The St Kitts-Nevis Digital Archaeology Initiative will develop a digital archive of diverse archaeological and historical data related to the experiences of the enslaved men and women who laboured on 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century sugar plantations in the Caribbean. An international team of scholars will digitise and deliver the first collection of its kind from two 18th-century plantations and their slave villages, one located on Nevis and the other on St Kitts.

The World Wide Web of Humanities (Oxford Internet Institute/Internet Archive)

This project will create and assemble a suite of open source tools for data collection and curation, to support new methodologies for internet research built around large collections of web data, using automated tools to extract, index and analyse the data. The collection will be designed to help researchers and policy makers gain an understanding both of the state of the art of e-Humanities and of historical trends and developments in the field.

Shakespeare Quartos Archive (Oxford University/ Folger Shakespeare Library)

The University of Oxford and the Folger Shakespeare Library will be leading a range of institutions that are reuniting all 75 pre-1641 quarto editions of Shakespeare's plays into a single online collection with contributions from the world's leading repositories in the UK and USA. The project will also develop an interface and tools to enable close examination and comparison of these internationally significant treasures,

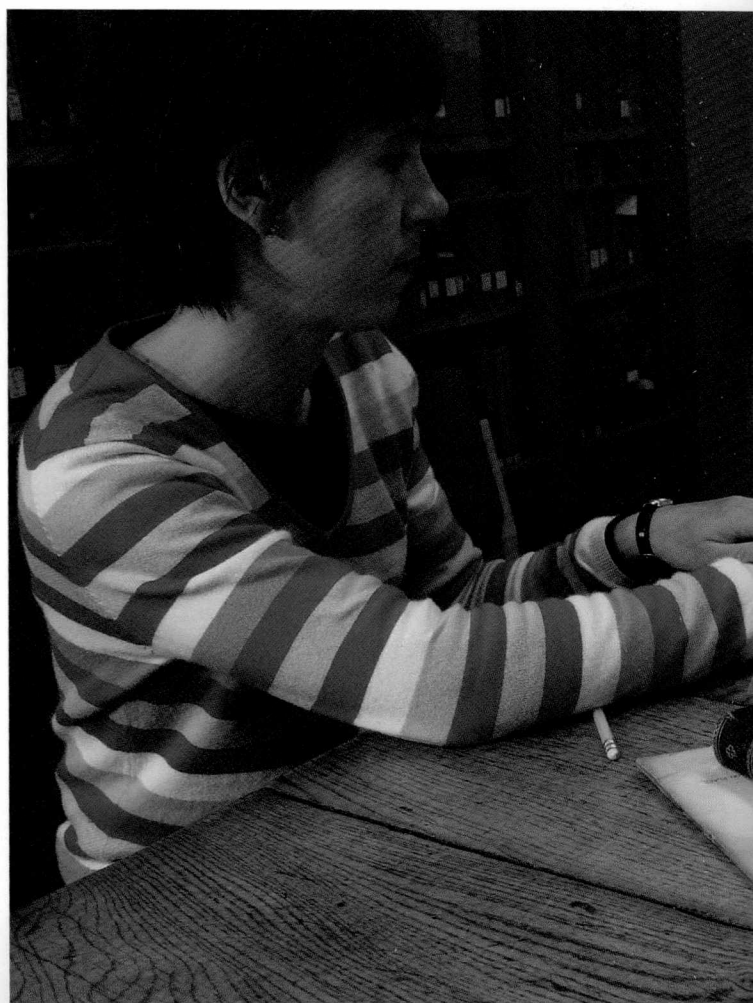
which will be freely available to scholars, teachers, students and actors across the globe.

PhiloGrid (Imperial College/Tufts University)

Based initially upon texts and services from the Perseus Digital Library available under Creative Commons and open source licence, PhiloGrid is continuing the development of a virtual research environment for Greco-Roman antiquity, allowing users to uncover connections between fragments of classical texts that previously would have taken extensive scholarly investigation.

*These projects demonstrate
the great potential of
collaboration between our
two countries in the field of
digitisation*

Dr Malcolm Read, JISC Executive Secretary



Concordia (King's College London/New York University)

This project will bring together the content of three existing, highly respected collections (including 50,000 papyrological and 3,000 epigraphic texts) and newly digitised content (an additional 950 epigraphic texts plus complete topographic and toponymic records for over 3,000 historical geographic features) to create an research resource for Greek and Roman Libya and Egypt, and beyond.

Next Steps

JISC and NEH are keen to expand on this work and create more substantial projects. The initial awards of £120,000 (c \$236,000) per project were intended to test the waters and see the enthusiasm for such work and the challenges it raises.

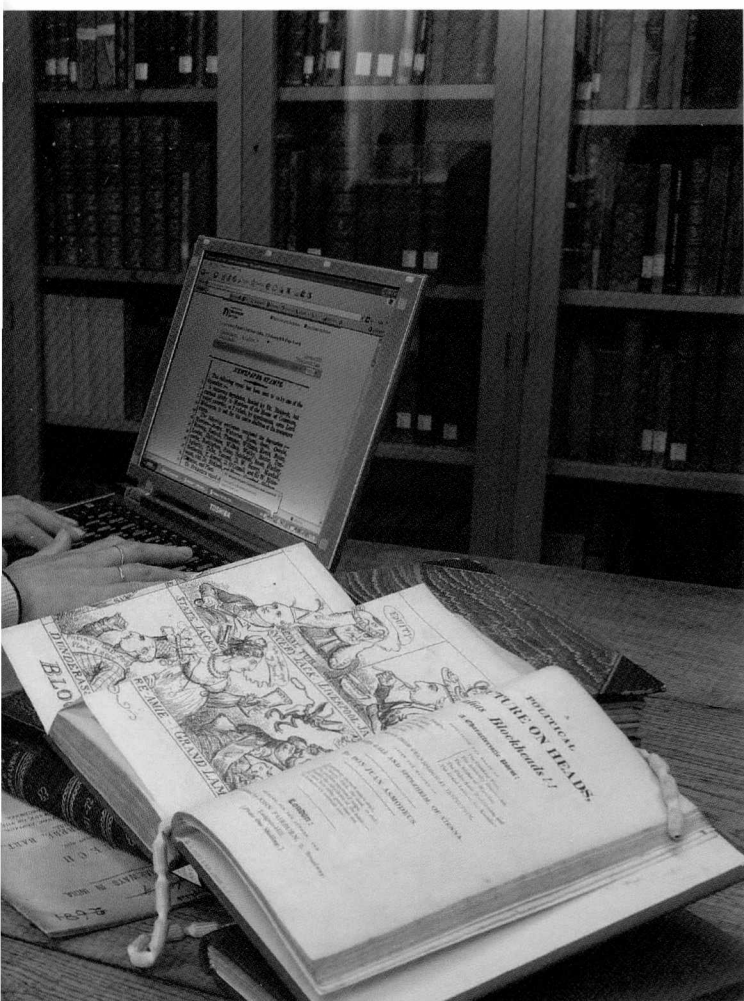
Early signs are encouraging. The large number of proposals (21) and their quality attest to the enthusiasm within the community for this kind of work. The successful applicants represent a broad range of disciplines, time periods and institutions. Topics ranged from archaeological slave records to e-Humanities data, from Greco-Roman fragments

to complete collections of Shakespeare's tragic Danish prince. The breadth of some of the collaborations is equally impressive; the Shakespeare Quartos Archive, for example, includes six participating libraries that account for two-thirds of the world's pre-1641 Shakespeare quartos. JISC and NEH were further encouraged by the strong innovative quality in each of the proposals, which hold promise that the technology will be shared with and re-used by future digital projects. PhiloGrid (Imperial College/Tufts University), for example, will develop their virtual research environment in a manner that makes its use in different disciplines possible. Digitisation, therefore, is providing a means not only for collaboration, but also for innovation.

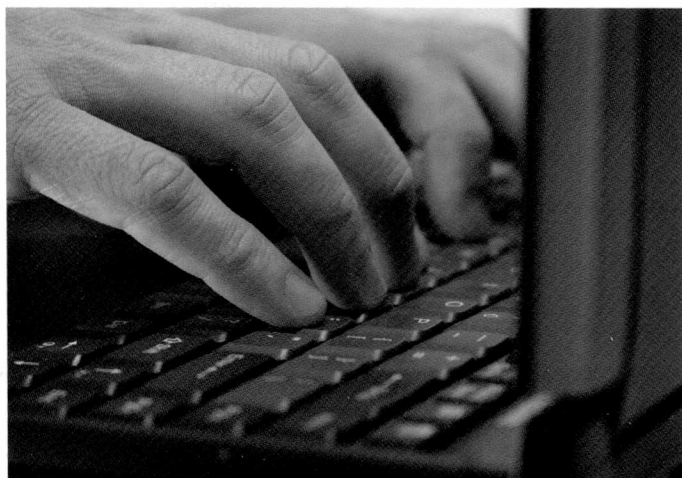
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An additional unexpected benefit has been that projects that did not receive funding are beginning to work together anyway. Several applicants (both successful and unsuccessful) stated privately that the very act of putting out a joint call from proposals enabled them to break down barriers that had previously hindered collaboration, highlighting the usefulness of these kinds of joint calls beyond their immediate funding impact. The Folger Shakespeare Library's Richard Kuhta remarked that the JISC and NEH grant initiative 'was exactly the prompt we needed to launch an exchange that transformed geographically distant collections into partner institutions.'⁴

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⁴ Remarks at a press event announcing the grants at the Folger Shakespeare Library, 25 March 2008.



More broadly, announcements made in April 2008 by the UK Prime Minister on the value of US-UK research indicate the importance of this particular transatlantic work. One of the initiatives he announced is based at the two institutions that received funding for the Concordia project listed above. This initiative will be a study group led by the principal of King's College London and the president of New York University, examining how cooperation between UK and US institutions can be intensified, starting with the potential for expanding faculty and research exchanges.⁵

⁵ www.kcl.ac.uk/news/news_details.php?news_id=773&year=2008

This is though a first step and there is a need to build upon this and existing work that has been carried out, creating more substantial projects in the future.

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