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johannes factotum & the ends of expertise

Tags: libraries, politics, scholarly-communication

[This—more or less—is the text of a keynote talk I delivered last week in Atlanta, at the 2014 DLF Forum: the annual gathering of the Digital Library Federation. DLF is one among several stellar programs at CLIR, the Council on Library and Information Resources, where I have the honor to serve as a Distinguished Presidential Fellow.]

You're probably wondering who Johannes Factotum may be. Let's start with a story.

Grad school in English, for me, began with a scavenger hunt. I am deeply sorry to report that this was not as much fun as it might sound. In 1996, the University of Virginia Library's OPAC had been online for only a few years, and for most, the physical card catalog reigned supreme. Journal collections were almost entirely in print or on microfiche, but above all were *in the building*—shared and offsite storage being mostly a thing of the future. Search engines, which were poor, were supplemented by hand-coded indices, many of which were made and maintained by individual enthusiasts. These folks were a mix of established and self-proclaimed experts who had newly gotten their hands on the means of production. What they produced were largely pages of blue and purple links on Netscape-grey backgrounds, punctuated with little icons of shoveling dudes—lists of this and that, labors of love, some of which aimed to be comprehensive.

Comprehensiveness was not a ridiculous aim, because digital resources were, relatively speaking, minimal. I thought, when I applied to grad school, that I might like to study the life and work of the poet John Keats. There was, at the time, to the best of my knowledge, *one single website* in existence on the famous poet. I had blown my meager savings the year before, buying the super-cool five-inch-thick laptop on which I had created it, myself.

Every incoming grad student in English, in those days, began his or her apprenticeship into the profession with a required "Methods Course." What were The Methods? What did you need to be *able to do*, to perform, in order to show yourself a capable humanities scholar in the mid-to-late 1990s? What were the skills to master, the processes to enact, on our first steps toward serious, tweedy expertise? We were young (for the most part) and earnest (for the most part) and we were keen to know.

Our professor was a Renaissance scholar with the air of a man who had drawn the short straw in the faculty lounge. He walked quietly into the room on the first day and passed around blurry, photocopied sheets. I recall squinting at the page. There was no syllabus there, no list of readings or specialized techniques or rules to follow or needful tools. *Alright, Dr. Expert* (we all looked at each other, puzzled) —*what are The Methods*? No answers to that question, either. On the page, there were only… *questions.* Questions for *us* to answer—about 20 of them—some short, some long, most mind-boggling, touching on different eras and genres of literature. Questions whose answers, we soon learned, could only be found by tracing a long string of references to a teensy bit of evidence that would ultimately be located in some minimally-indexed piece of microfilm, or on one page of one book, resting on one shelf in a 10-storey building housing nearly four million volumes—with no hint as to where to start. As a path into an academic discipline, our Methods Course was not far from hazing—with a little bit of Lord of the Flies thrown in. That's because life on the island went downhill fast. We were asked to check in each day for some genteel reporting of who found what—and in a hyper-competitive department, it quickly became evident that the first students to answer each question were not above mis-shelving the precious books that contained the answers—or checking them out (prompting recall wars), or just furtively carrying them around the stacks for hours at a time. Ladies and gentlemen, I survived an Evil Library Scavenger Hunt.

Today, I only remember one of the questions—the most succinct—from that exercise. It read, simply, *"Who was Iohannes Factotum?"*

Fast-forward eighteen years. When the DLF Forum program committee did me the major honor of an invitation to speak with you today, Rachel Frick and I chatted on the phone. *What would be most useful*? I wanted to know. What did the committee think you'd most want to hear? "Oh, you know," she said, "do something like that talk you gave at Code4Lib, on 'lazy consensus.' Let's have power-to-the-people!" Rachel was referring to a cheerful presentation from a couple of years ago, about forward momentum against the natural inertia of institutions. In it, I had shared some good-hearted but also firm and effective ways for developers to short-circuit a typical library pattern that can have them waiting endlessly for group consensus before action, or holding off on good and unobjectionable work because the powers-that-be have not yet granted permission. My Technicolor slide-deck had had Superfriends valentines and a picture of a GI Joe riding a plastic Taun-Taun. The caption read, "Drive it like you stole it."

Now, my *most recent* big talk, on the other hand, was a little different. That one was written for the Digital Humanities conference held in Switzerland this past summer. It was an environmental humanities talk, a talk in a field that didn't really exist when I was in school. My goal there was to jumpstart conversations about the ethical imperatives of DH and cultural heritage work in light of new understandings about our place in deep, deep time—which basically means in the face of oblivion. I spoke about destruction, decline, and recovery, about anthropogenic climate change, and about the lasting material traces of humankind on the earth, in the so-called Anthropocene era. It was a talk about graceful degradation: about preservation and coming to terms with the ephemeral, and about responsibility and hope at what might be the end of it all—the next great mass extinction of life on this planet—which, because we drove it like we stole it, is sadly underway. In other words, it was a talk about the end of the world as we know it. When Rachel called, I didn't feel fine.

So, I still had *those* ideas rattling around in my head like fishbones and lumps of coal, when I started thinking about power to the library people again. I wrote my title for today first, and because I have

remained (like Keats) half in love with endings, I decided to come to you with some ideas not only about expertise as a concept, as it applies to libraries, higher ed, and contemporary life—but also about what we might call the *ends of expertise*. This includes its endangerment, for sure, as challenges to academic and scientific expertise play out in our wider society—but by its "ends" I really mean its purpose, its goals, its ethic: what we want and in some cases desperately need from expert knowledge, right now. All this is background I believe worth sharing, because it explains what you may sense as a melancholy and (for me) uncharacteristically irritable undertone this morning—and also because I will return to the notion of our grandest challenges in a little while.

On a smaller scale, and right now, we're here to open up a few precious days of exchange, in what I think of as a singular and beautifully contradictory community. And that's not only because digital libraries themselves are simultaneously monuments to memory and problem-solving enterprises, but because we —at the DLF Forum, unlike so many specialized tech and academic conferences—are at once a gathering of generalists and of experts. I'm pretty sure you'll *feel* that balance as you move from session to session this week, hopefully finding conversations that deepen your own considerable expertise and allow you to share it, and also those that happily expose your ignorance—that introduce you to completely new approaches or systems and tools, and that let you feel a newbie's excitement again. Over the next few days, you'll be constantly placing the stuff you know and the stuff you come to realize you *don't know* within the broad and general matrix of the work and shared mission of the DLF community.

The ability (actually, I think, the *requirement*) that the people in this room inhabit and embody *that particular mix*—that combination of our serious, zeroed-in, individualistic, obsessive, and rare specialization on the one hand, and our expansive, jack-of-all-trades pragmatism and service-orientation and social consciousness and breadth of vision (on the other) is—I think—one of the most profoundly attractive things about a career in and around libraries. On the home-front and through shared points of contact like the DLF, we are constantly trying to integrate our various brands of technical, scholarly, and professional expertise: to *contextualize* them within a whole, and to make them *operate* together. It's a challenge! And an attraction to *that specific challenge* may have been a factor in your decision to pursue this line of work—as it was in mine.

But something worth your consideration is going on—not only in libraries, but in the broader culture in which they live. Something is going on with the very concept of "expertise," and with our notion of *its ends*. We find ourselves, in 2014, in a changed, and a charged, relation to the purposes and function of expert knowledge. The sage on the stage still speaks (or TED-talks) in her diminishment, but the street finds its uses and the crowds express their wisdom. Or if not that, at least they assert their undeniable presence in new conversations, in new ways. And many key disciplines, particularly in the liberal arts, are now emerging from a multigenerational period in which scholars were trained *to a point*, in which the intense specialization of graduate education—while wonderful for advancing knowledge within narrow zones of expertise—posed what we might recognize as a translational or an interoperability problem.

Many of you will be familiar with the great "Illustrated Guide to a PhD," by computer scientist Matt Might, which maps out the relationship between general knowledge (a well-rounded childhood and undergraduate education; a praxis-oriented master's degree) and specialist—so-called "terminal"— graduate training, which pushes you right to the edge of what we might imagine as a circle containing all human knowledge. Dr. Might points out to new PhD students, who are aiming to push and push and eventually break through that circle, that when you're in a mode *like this*, "the world looks different to you. So [he says], don't forget the bigger picture." Might ends, hopefully or dishearteningly, depending on your mood, with the injunction to "keep pushing."

New, motivated and iconoclastic cohorts of students and scholars are beginning to resist the isolating implications of extreme specialization—and it's worth our noticing that they come to libraries to do it.

Communities of practice like the digital humanities—and communities of advocacy, like open science—are seeking ways to advance disciplinary and domain knowledge at the same time as they deepen its connection to the bigger picture and hasten its application outside the academy. This trend is in part prompted by researchers' encounters with new, enabling technologies and with relevant data at suddenly, massively larger scales and at whole new levels of availability. In other words, this trend is prompted by their encounters with the very tools and content *we set up our digital libraries to provide*. This is one reason I'm bringing these ideas to you today. More and more scholars are seeking ways to work across established jargon-delimited, technical, or methodological divisions, and to position their contributions as part of a larger whole. *We need to help them.*

But we also need to understand the context in which this is happening. Even as we're partnering in new ways and adjusting our library services to foster these developments, we know that deep scholarly and methodological expertise in its various forms is, more and more, being *structurally* diminished and put on the defense—in our colleges and universities, in government and our state-funded agencies and cultural heritage institutions, and in society as a whole.

This comes most notably with a sweeping economic shift to the "contingent" or short-term/at-will/soft-money employment of knowledge workers of all sorts, and the almost inevitable fragmenting and erosion in the stability and power of their local, professional or guild-like communities that is attendant on that shift. In higher education, we think of this largely in terms of the disastrous job market facing new scholars, and the challenges to academic freedom and faculty self-governance that come with adjunctification—but libraries and labs are not immune, both in our own internal employment practices and in our conceptual positions as honored partners in many institutions. We in libraries and DH centers should be asking ourselves, more publicly and with greater regularity than we presently do, to what degree we are resisting or *contributing to* the establishment of a damaging new administrative world order.

This question is particularly acute because, at the same time that labor practices conducive to the work of experts appear to be on the decline—conducive, that is, to the work of domain- and methods-based scholars and teachers, academic researchers, and information professionals like librarians and technology staff—a new kind of expertise has established itself within our institutions. It, on the other hand, is alive and well—and no wonder: its very focus is resiliency, "<u>strategic dynamism</u>," streamlining, and change. This is the field of *expert management*—of professional, business-oriented, full-time *administrative* expertise.

It was not always so. But now, as the post-war management sciences have been codified into their own field, we see our scholarly and cultural institutions pass with increasing frequency into the hands of career administrators and businesspeople who have never worked in the areas they hope to shape. These folks usually *sincerely mean well*—and may *do well*—but it is a consequential truth that they have often inadequately experienced life on the other side of their desks. And even when our administrators rise up through the ranks, in today's corporatized universities and bureaucratized cultural heritage institutions, rare are the ones able to stay connected with their scholarship or their practice and with the colleagues and populations they once served directly. I will likely not ingratiate myself to present company with such a line of thinking, but I feel I need to point out that this group can include admins at all levels. Even project managers—a <u>vibrant community</u> of whom attend DLF—if not given time to keep their own scholarly and technical skills current, can quickly become disconnected from the labor they are meant to guide.

When even the most well-intended expert management is applied, according to its own imperatives, which is to say without an appreciation for the level of stability, predictability, and fundamental autonomy that knowledge work requires—and when it is applied without a visceral understanding *of the*

work itself and of the *culture and identity* of its practitioners—administrative or managerial expertise can be experienced as a compartmentalizing and anti-humanistic force. At its heart, it's modernity's drive toward optimization and clarity, a neoliberal pattern now playing itself out within two of our most recalcitrant and cherished and inefficient and awesome institutions: our quirky libraries and the universities. In terms of our theme today, I also find this mode of management apt to overlook the degree to which many academic disciplines and technical fields are *already* engaged in a natural, self-directed, appropriately-paced, research-interest-driven coming-together. Expert management can feel profoundly at odds with our messily human hopes and selves, with an historical understanding of institutions, and with the desire most of us have to exist as whole people working on projects that are holistic and shared.

But let's zoom out a little. What's driving this? Well, money. At the same moment that widespread unemployment sends the message to ever-larger groups of youth, that attending college is *simply a base-line requirement* for achieving or maintaining a tenuous hold on a middle-class existence, states across the country have been engaged in the ground-level de-funding of public institutions of higher learning. My own flagship, Jeffersonian, "public Ivy" receives less than 6% of its annual operating budget as an allocation from the state of Virginia—a 50% drop since the 1990s. That's what "public education" means today. Meanwhile, support at the federal level for new discovery—that is, for basic and applied grant-funded research across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities—is similarly in the toilet. The already-miniscule budgets of the NEH and NEA have long since flat-lined and are in repeated danger of complete erasure. The inadequacy of NSF and NIH funding, long the envy of the humanities, has now begun to make the news, most notably through the need for "ice-bucket challenges" to raise research dollars for chronic diseases that can't turn a profit, and in strongly-worded commentary by the CDC (right here in Atlanta), about our failure to fund research into *even the most journalistically charismatic* of plagues. Academic publishing, once the domain of small societies and presses, has sold its birthright to the Wileys and Elseviers of the world. And finally, as *this audience* knows all too well, our public libraries, museums, archives, information repositories, and state-supported arts and cultural heritage institutions—which serve as core infrastructure for the good life and the continuing wellspring of an informed democracy—are suffering the effects of a decades-long de-funding of the commons.

It's not surprising then, given this climate, that our politically appointed governing boards and a growing class of professional university administrators have become ever more aligned to the logic of the market and to strongly neoliberal notions of management efficiency and metrics—of measurable productivity. It's not surprising that they are less and less aligned with the intuitive and pluralistic ways in which their own faculty and expert staff conceive of a field of inquiry, conceive of a university, conceive of a library. And it's no wonder that, within our institutions, we so often sense the dangerous unraveling of expert and generalist knowledge-workers' connection with self-governance and the common good.

This is not an inevitable state of affairs. There have been <u>moments</u> in our country's history when political will was differently aligned, even in the face of severe economic challenges. I think of programs like the GI Bill, designed to send soldiers to school, and the Morrill Act, which established the land-grant universities that welcomed them. I think also of the Depression-countering New Deal, which put thousands of unemployed people to work bolstering our country's material and cultural foundations and which, by the way, funded the construction of the beautiful old library building in which I later learned the identity of Johannes Factotum. (Still not gonna tell you.)

So. We're a bit more than halfway into this talk, and I've been addressing a variety of cultural changes leading to a troubling state of affairs. My goal in the rest of it will be to suggest to you a few intellectual frameworks on which we might hang alternate futures and prop up the counter-forces that are within our reach in the DLF community. Can we consider libraries themselves as models and starting-points for another way? Can a field that tends to welcome Jane and Johnny Do-It-Alls… (okay, that's a hint, that's the bastardized Latin translation of *Johannes Factotum*)—can a *generalist profession* help conceive of

greater and nobler possibilities for expert knowledge? What would happen if we thought about the evolving relationship between generalist and expert understanding itself—that new relationship that is unfolding in our libraries—as a tide-turning force within the academy, and beyond? What would happen if we tried to harness it as an agent of social justice, or environmental change.

I also want to address scholarly and research expertise *not* in the schizophrenic fashion we often hear from conservative commentators—not, that is, in some kind of simultaneous eulogy about the *ending of expertise* in the face of a dumbed-down popular culture (on the one hand) and a rant (on the other) about its esoteric, taxpayer-swindling pointy-headed pointlessness. That's because I find a multifarious expertise more vital and needed and—despite challenges—*more cohesive and actionable and present* than ever before. So, the ideas I'll throw out are meant to orient us expert generalists toward the ends of expertise, its *telos* or purpose or goal.

But *what is* expertise, anyway? What do we mean by the word? Who designates, decides?

The anointing of experts far too easily becomes an exercise in othering, and in the consolidation of power. How do we acquire it—but more importantly for institutions of education and cultural memory—how do we give it away? Maybe expertise rests in external, repeatable methods, in learning to select and apply appropriate rules and procedures, like the complex algorithms and decision-making heuristics that underlie CS work in expert systems design, or that tell you how to trace a series of references on a scavenger hunt through the stacks. Or maybe it's identity-driven—a set of specific intellectual and cultural experiences that have their expression in a kind of deep literacy or intuition. And what if expert knowledge is somehow yoked to both, becoming tacit understanding?—those methods and techniques and habits of mind that are difficult to convey except through personal contact, embodied performance, sharing of selfhood and experience, and through praxis. What then?

We think a lot about these concepts at the UVa Library Scholars' Lab. The development of tacit knowledge, as we argued in hosting a recent NEH summit for software developers, is both necessary and natural *and* a kind of "Speaking in Code," which—if left unexamined—can prompt misunderstandings and oppositional, binary thinking, and can lead to an unhealthy isolation and consolidation of authority. And although tacit knowledge will remain hard to acquire, we can easily respond to the increasing evidence that expertise is not inaccessibly trapped in subjectivity, but rather arises through communal understanding, as an emergent property of communities of practice. Broaden our communities, and you have broadened the field of play; that is, you've not just made expert knowledge more widely available, but you've increased the *varieties* of real and valid expertise. (This is why we run another program at the Scholars' Lab, the Praxis Program, about which my colleague Laura Miller will be speaking in one of the next sessions this morning.) "An emergent property of communities of practice." In other words, expertise may always be in some sense sympathetic: socially and collaboratively constructed, from multiple intelligences in interaction with each other. Well, that sounds… like a library.

Taken all together, this is procedural knowledge—expertise in *locating understanding* in the communities and situations and architectures in which it may arise. It means that, in an age of information overload, alongside the empathetic intelligence we need in order to imaginatively inhabit other points of view, and the technical skills we need to participate in generative practices that *make* knowledge and understanding, one further kind of expertise rests in navigating communities, and in understanding (as Dan Cohen put it, in setting up *PressForward*) how to "find the good,"—that is, how an expert community might learn to apply and adjust and become *self-conscious* about its filters. (I recall my friend Ted Underwood's sage advice when I compared my dismay at watching certain events unfold in social media to the fretting I was also doing about what invisible toxins were killing the guppies in my kids' fish-tank. Ted said, "The solution is often the same. Change your filter.")

Sometimes we *think* we're filtering out ignorance.

You may be familiar with the <u>Dunning-Kruger effect</u>: that famous, Ig Nobel-prizewinning series of Cornell University studies that demonstrated one basic truth about expertise. The truth is this: the dumber you are, the smarter you *think* you are—that is, the more highly you tend to rate your competency, judgment, and skills. And the opposite is true, too. As Shakespeare put it, "The Fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a Fool."

Or consider the work of Dan Kahan of Yale, who examines American political identity in the matrix of basic knowledge about science. Kahan finds that, when he subtly adjusts the *wording* of questions in a quiz in order to avoid triggering partisan political responses—those scripts that we can so easily internalize—that conservative climate change deniers in fact understand *just as much* about the overwhelming scientific consensus around global warming as do liberal environmentalists. Change the wording back, to trigger the scripts, and their answers indicate no such knowledge. Kagan has done similar studies in which, as a *Mother Jones* reporter <u>put it</u>, even fundamental math skills "go right out the window when political passions come into play." In other words, it's the identity, stupid. (Or, to quote the Bard again, "Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be!")

And then we have Tom Nichols, who teaches in the squicky field of national security studies at Harvard and the US Naval War College. Nichols describes our present moment in a recent *Federalist* essay as "<u>The Death of Expertise</u>"—what he calls "a Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laymen, students and teachers, knowers and wonderers—in other words, between those of any achievement in an area and those with none at all." Now, speaking of identity politics… You may—as I first inclined to—read this as the quintessence of cultural elitism. (I must confess that Nichols redeems himself somewhat, later in the essay, in a discussion of expertise as the servant, not the master, of democracy. It's probably worth a read.) But!—no lesser a light than the late, great Carl Sagan *similarly* decries the erosion of expertise and the celebration of ignorance.

In <u>*The Demon-Haunted World*</u>, Sagan writes of having [I quote] "a foreboding of an America in my children's or grandchildren's time—when the United States is a service and information economy; when nearly all the manufacturing industries have slipped away to other countries; when awesome technological powers are in the hands of a very few, and no one representing the public interest can even grasp the issues; when the people have lost the ability to set their own agendas or knowledgeably question those in authority; when… we slide, almost without noticing, back into superstition and darkness." "The dumbing down of America," he writes, "is most evident in… a kind of celebration of ignorance."

All this got me thinking. And I feel obligated to report to you that my own field, the digital humanities, has a deep and an abiding love of ignorance. Two of my most cherished mentors, themselves no dummies—Jerome McGann and John Unsworth—early on bowed before the goddess Agnoia, before Ignorance, as at once the grandest confrontation of humanities computing and, in a sense, its greatest goal —though obviously not slouching toward the dire ends that Sagan and Nichols fear.

In a statement called "<u>Imagining What You Don't Know</u>," Jerry McGann recognized our work in developing an intellectual model for the Rossetti Archive—one of the earliest large-scale digital humanities projects—as an iterative exercise in *the most challenging thing*. It was not really (or not only) an effort to make content accessible online and to codify existing knowledge about 19th-century art and print culture. (We sometimes think that's what digital collections or libraries or so-called "archives" are.) Instead, the core intellectual project—the development of a schema for representing Rossetti's work and our collective, evolving theory of it—was all about discovery. In other words, the *project* was a *projection* of ourselves into de-familiarizing frameworks where we could (as Jerry put it) *begin to*

imagine—to touch what he would later call the "hem of a quantum garment"—the fundamentally *unknowable*.

In a similar—if less lofty—vein, John Unsworth opened a key 1997 paper on the "Importance of Failure" with an injunction to digital humanities practitioners (before we were called that) to resist the managerial forces that can drive us to report only on shiny success. This essay began with the following words—still maybe the wisest in our field: "If an electronic scholarly project can't fail and doesn't produce new ignorance, then it isn't worth a damn." (As an aside, if you'd like some insight into why long-term DH practitioners have grown weary of being newly alerted to the existence of techno-boosterism, read that paper and reflect on the fact that *we* all read and reflected on it seventeen years ago.)

My own crankiness and particular professional outlook aside, I can tell you that DH is not alone in its appreciation of ignorance and vulnerability. In the 1950s, Nobel prize-winning scientist Niels Bohr defined an expert as a person who has "already made every possible mistake within his or her field." Martin Schwartz, writing in the *Journal of Cell Science* in 2008, argued that PhD students must be brought to understand what he calls the "importance of stupidity in scientific research," because—to paraphrase—new discoveries cannot be made by people who are uncomfortable feeling dumb.

Whether you come at your work from a science and technology angle, from a deeply humanistic and design perspective, or from the fields of information and data science that blend the two, you can see that our watchwords here are, on the one hand, *discovery*—a notion that doesn't necessarily rest in "eureka!" moments, but more in the empirical production or demonstration of new ignorance, without which no field can advance—and on the other hand (perhaps more subtly), we are talking about the cultivation of a deeply productive, generalizing *empathy*. This latter is the ability to project oneself into new, ineffable subjectivities and alien understandings—a Rossettian inner standing-point, or as McGann called it, the ability to *imagine* what we don't *know*. This, too, is a research method, particularly strong in the humanities. It's one that I associate with certain brands of feminist and playful inquiry.

And it is in that context of empathy and investigation that I return to the alarming themes with which I began. Despite the fact that their academic working environments are becoming perversely less supportive at the moment that we most need their expertise, scientists and scholars across a wide array of fields are shifting their thinking, and adjusting the lenses through which they view the world, in the face of grand challenges. Perhaps the grandest and most cross-cutting of these appear under the banner of "the Anthropocene." They take as given the realization that human beings have acquired and have exercised a capacity to alter the basic environmental conditions for life on the planet (and not for the better). They understand, more fully now, that all problems are shared problems—that the snow, as Joyce put it, is general. The implications of this realization for science, politics, engineering, agriculture, and global health and human rights are plain—but in philosophy and arts and letters, too, we are coming to terms with our position and fate in what can now be understood as a new geological age, the one we hubristically and fatalistically name for ourselves: the Anthropocene.

This is a moment that reveals how ill-suited our recently-narrowed zones of administrative power and scholarly expertise have become, to long-term and big picture thinking. As Jo Guldi and David Armitage argue in their new book, *The History Manifesto*, it is time, again, to zoom out in our thinking to the longue durée. Three things drive this. We are developing and refining analytic tools to support the distant reading of datasets larger than we've ever tried to process before. We are developing new platforms and techniques to foster open access to this basic data and to our findings, and to promote cross-disciplinary collaboration. And we are increasingly confronted with a growing *moral imperative* to move away from focused specialties and timespans and back to thinking big—back, in fact, to the future. This is the setting for the modern digital library. Here are the ends of expertise.

Now, I've put a lot on the table this morning and have posed or more properly *implied* some hard questions—too many questions, maybe. If you're feeling that's the case, then let me simply encourage you to go into each DLF Forum session over the next few days with a version of *this one query* in the back of your minds. Try it, whether the session is user-oriented or about our *internal dealings* in building 21ˢᵗ century libraries. And the question happens to be a version of something pragmatic-minded DLF attendees are maybe always naturally inclined to wonder: *will it work?*

The "it" in the question is this: it's *the zoom*, the motion along the continua I've been describing this morning. Please take a moment to ask yourselves, as you're listening to others and as you're presenting your own work this week: is the expert/generalist or the local/global or the personal/collective dichotomy playing out here in a fruitful way, in a way likely to make a positive contribution at a critical moment for us all? Are we considering these levels of zoom consciously enough—and fluidly enough, and with respect for the people laboring in them? I'll be interested to know and hope you will share, when you've had time to reflect on what you gained from the Forum, whether this kind of orientation changes your outlook and your take-aways from the meeting at all.

Now, finally, at long last: *who was* Johannes Factotum? Of course my suspense-building around the name has been ridiculous, because you're all sitting out there with laptops and tablets and phones, and your "Google-fueled, blog-sodden" global network of digital libraries will tell you the answer to that one-time expert question in a nanosecond—but trust me that in 1996, particularly if somebody had lifted (or perhaps was sitting on) the OED, a question like this required an involved expedition, tracing footnotes and references, other people's revelations and allusions and past discoveries, and dodging book thieves and mean girls through the bowels of Alderman Library—that it was not a question then possible to answer without building on a basis of generalist knowledge and developing a working level of research expertise. (But it was do-able—and yet would have been better done together, not alone.)

"Iohannes Factotum" was a mild insult lobbed in 1592. The phrase is found in a pamphlet called *A Groat's-worth of Wit*, by one Robert Greene, contemporary critic of the Elizabethan stage. Johannes Factotum, a jack-of-all-trades, the original Johnny Do-It-All. It would cost you just a groat to read the first known review of a certain empathetic, wide-ranging, hyper-specific chronicler of the human condition—to take in a critique of an expert generalist, a playwright named William Shakespeare.

Tags: libraries, politics, scholarly-communication

One Response to "johannes factotum & the ends of expertise"

1. all at once « Bethany Nowviskie
   on Nov 25th, 2014
   @ 9:40am:

   […] scholarship and work. Balance in perspective. The imperative to zoom freely and efficaciously, from specialist to generalist understanding, from the longue durée to the specific instance–from big data to small data and back again. […]

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