Reimagining the Digital Research Commons for the Canadian HSS Community
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Introduction

The importance of virtual spaces to our personal and professional lives has, over the course of the pandemic, become clear. Unable to gather in person with family, friends, coworkers, and colleagues, many of us have (with varying degrees of willingness) gathered instead in virtual classrooms, living rooms, and workspaces.

Many of these virtual spaces are designed for the scholarly community. The online academic conference that was quite rare a little over a year ago has become the norm, but the scholarly community has been gathering and connecting in virtual spaces for years on platforms such as ResearchGate, Academia.edu, and Mendeley—platforms known variously as digital research commons, digital scholarly commons, and academic social network sites (ASNS) (Bhardwaj 2017; Jordan 2014, 2019; Meishar-Tal and Pieterse 2017). The widespread adoption of these platforms testifies to the scholarly community's openness to engaging in virtual spaces and sharing their work. The most common platforms, however, are US- and European-based commercial ventures geared toward the scientific community. There are exceptions to this trend: Humanities Commons, a not-for-profit digital research commons originally launched by the Modern Language Association and now hosted by the University of Michigan, has emerged as a valuable hub for the Humanities community and serves as a model for a new space intended to meet the unique needs of the Canadian Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) research community: the Canadian HSS Commons.

Building on research by Caroline Winter, Tyler Fontenot, Luis Meneses, Alyssa Arbuckle, and Ray Siemens (2020) about the historical and intellectual roots of the digital research commons, this paper briefly introduces the Canadian HSS Commons before examining it from a DH perspective. To this end, it focuses on how the Commons will meet the needs of Canadian researchers working within the highly collaborative, methodologically diverse, and exploratory domain of the digital humanities. We take the self-reflexive stance of the digital humanities called for in recent years by scholars such as Lauren Klein and Matthew Gold (2016), or Alison Booth and Miriam Posner (2020),[1] to critically examine the metaphor of the commons as applied to an open, virtual space and to intellectual resources. Indeed, alongside its development efforts, the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) Partnership[2] has stressed the importance of theorizing spaces such as the Canadian HSS Commons with the kind of self-reflexive gaze scholars such scholars regard as fundamental to current DH scholarship and development efforts. We conclude that acknowledging the present-day challenges involved in implementing this ideal—and resisting the social, economic, and institutional pressures that have

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[1] Booth and Posner, for example, tentatively define DH as "Advanced humanities research that uses *and reflects on* computational methods or digital tools" before asserting more forcefully that DH "must be suspicious of archives taken at face value" and "must concern itself deeply with race, gender, disability, economic and linguistic access, and other intersecting axes of power embedded in our materials and methods, as demanded by this troubled moment in the world" (2020, 10; emphasis added).

[2] See inke.ca for more information on the INKE Partnership.

historically threatened to transform such spaces into sites of exclusion rather than inclusion—will allow us to reimagine the commons as a virtual, open, collaborative space for creating and sharing information.

What is the Canadian HSS Commons?

The Canadian HSS Commons is an in-development virtual community space for Canadian voices—specifically voices of the HSS community. This platform serves as a hub for open social scholarship, combining elements of social network sites, tools and platforms for collaboration, and institutional repositories in a space designed and built for the linguistically, geographically, and culturally diverse community of HSS researchers in Canada, as well as Canadian legal and licensing frameworks, which offer some distinct advantages over those of other countries. It is part of a SSHRC Partnership-funded research program examining the benefits of a community-run, non-commercial online research commons in the Canadian context.

The Canadian HSS Commons is a deeply collaborative initiative led by the INKE Partnership in collaboration with CANARIE, University of Victoria (UVic) Systems, Compute Canada, the Federation for Humanities and Social Sciences, Humanities Commons, the Canadian Research Knowledge Network (CRKN), Edith Cowan University, Érudit, Iter: Gateway to the Middle Ages & Renaissance, the Public Knowledge Project (PKP), and UVic Libraries.

The Commons: Historical and Theoretical Contexts

Tracing the history of digital commons from their pre-digital origins, one can better appreciate their present significance—as well as their potential to positively transform the academic landscape. As Winter et al. explain,

> The idea of the digital research commons has analogic historical roots in the English medieval practice of designating land—usually privately owned land—as available for common use. These commons were openly accessible to local residents—commoners—who depended on these lands and the resources they provided for farming and grazing livestock, as well as for transportation and for community (Boyle 2003; Rosenman 2012). Beginning around 1750, these common lands began to be enclosed—fenced off—so that they and their resources were accessible to private landowners only, and by the 1840s, there were few commons left (Neeson 1996; Rosenman 2012). (Winter et al. 2020)

Despite the many superficial differences between these historical "grassy commons" (Boyle 2003, 41)[3] and their contemporary counterparts, both share certain features—and vulnerabilities. Like their pre-digital predecessors, today's knowledge commons have evolved alongside the technologies that mediate them in response to an array of social, economic, and institutional pressures. The processes of enclosure that led to the privatization of previously shared lands have also affected digital spaces such as Academia.edu, a for-profit knowledge commons that has come under fire for its exclusion and exploitation of both non-paying and "premium" members (Adema and Hall 2015; Bond 2017; Duffy and Pooley 2017; Fitzpatrick 2015; Tennant 2017; Winter et al. 2020). Similarly, digital knowledge commons have evolved in response to changing ideas of what shared academic spaces should look like—or what metaphors most accurately

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[3] See also Winter et al. (2020).

capture the kind of scholarship that takes place within them.

One metaphor that has gained traction as a descriptor for DH as a whole—but also intersects with ongoing conversations regarding digital research commons—is the "expanded field": moving away from the "big tent" metaphor used a decade ago to portray DH as a diverse and capacious yet ultimately unified and coherent field, Klein and Gold embraced this metaphor, which they borrow from Rosalind Krauss, as part of a larger attempt to reimagine DH in more unstructured, indeterminate, and inclusive terms (2016).[4] This expanded field of DH is not a coordinated and monolithic menagerie, but rather a relational reconstellation of the increasingly open and fluid fields that comprise the humanities and social sciences: a complex of scholars and scholarly communities active across disciplinary, institutional, national, and linguistic lines.

Years earlier, Patrik Svensson also sought to disassemble the DH big tent by reframing it as "a meeting place, innovation hub, and trading zone" (2012). Notably, both of these newly posited metaphors—Klein and Gold's expanded field and Svensson's trading zone—resonate with the spatial metaphor of the commons. For example, like the expanded field of DH, the digital knowledge commons is less a single, bounded space to be fenced off (or flapped up, as it were) than a distributed, deliberately porous, and emphatically social network; digital commons often function as one data island among—and intentionally linked to—many others. Moreover, knowledge commons in general are also reminiscent of Svensson's trading zone in the sense that they are, first and foremost, sites of intellectual exchange. However, like the grassy commons that preceded them, *digital* knowledge commons are also subject to economic as well as social and institutional pressures—pressures which have resulted in the gradual privatization, monetization, parcelling-out, and collapse of many resource-based commons.[5] But neither resource scarcity nor privatization is inevitable. In the case of open platforms such as the Canadian HSS Commons, the primary resource—information—is what David Bollier calls a "nonrival" resource: that is, it actually increases in value "as more people use the resource and join the social community" (2006, 34). As Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom put it, "the more people who share useful knowledge, the greater the common good" (2006, 5).[6] So while the metaphor of the commons has historically been used to refer primarily to like-minded communities organized around a finite physical resource, today's not-for-profit digital knowledge commons inflect the term with notions of plenitude, openness, and cross-community sharing equally reminiscent of the metaphors currently being advanced to describe DH.

How Does the Canadian HSS Commons Meet the Needs of *Canadian* Researchers?

To date there has been no exploration of the role that a Canadian-specific, online, HSS research commons could play in networking, research and development, and community building activities. Our ongoing research aims to fill this gap, providing a foundation for other researchers, librarians, and administrators to develop innovative and efficient scholarly

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[4] For further discussion of the "big tent" metaphor and its implications, see also El Khatib and Winter (forthcoming); Svensson (2012) and Terras (2011). Regarding the "expanded field," Klein and Gold explicitly acknowledge that they are drawing on Krauss's (1979) formulation of the term in reference to sculpture.

[5] See, for example, Winter et al. regarding the "Tragedy of the Commons" (2020; cf. Hess and Ostrom 2006; Bollier 2006; Borgman 2007).

[6] However, just because knowledge commons are built around a nonrival resource, not all knowledge is or should be a common resource—and enclosure is still a possible threat.

communication practices in Canada, as elsewhere. As suggested above, the need for such a platform—and such research—is especially urgent at present: the COVID-19 global pandemic has introduced new disruptions and difficulties into our personal and professional lives while also underscoring (and exacerbating) existing barriers to digital access and communication. Responding to these challenges—as well as attendant questions about the environmental or health-related impacts of academic travel moving forward—the Canadian HSS Commons' robust virtual space and open-access model allow researchers to meet, share, and collaborate across institutions as well as national borders.

That said, as part of the national research infrastructure landscape, the Canadian HSS Commons has been developed to meet the needs of Canadian researchers—including those working within the highly collaborative, methodologically diverse, and exploratory domain of DH. Hosted on Canadian servers, it complements and extends platforms such as the Humanities Commons, with which it is partnered, by supporting both French- and English-language research, for example, and by broadening its scope to include the social sciences. To carry out this mandate, we have partnered with the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and we will be working closely with Canadian academic societies and their constituents, as well as other institutional and community partners.

Through such partnerships, the Commons is uniquely positioned to respond to the legal, academic, and institutional contexts most relevant to *Canadian* HSS researchers (a community of more than 90,000 individuals). To begin with, the INKE Partnership is highly attentive to the idiosyncratic challenges and opportunities of working within Canadian legal and research frameworks. The Commons' Terms of Service, which users must accept in order to use the site, were written in accordance with UVic politics as well as the *Canadian Copyright Act* and the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*—both of which are part of a complex Canadian legal infrastructure that differs from that of other countries on important issues regarding fair use and provisions for the protection of individuals, their research, and confidential information. Additionally, the Canadian HSS Commons is responsive to evolving requirements and recommendations regarding funding, long-term research data management (RDM), and open access, such as those outlined in the Government of Canada's "Open Letter" (2021) and "Tri-Agency Research Data Management Policy" (2021). Furthermore, the Commons is actively working to integrate with existing institutional repositories, research infrastructures, and organizations that are part of Canada's current and emerging research ecosystem. Through its partnership with ORCID-CA and the Canadian Access Federation (powered by CANARIE), for instance, the prototype already enables Single Sign-On (SSO) authentication and the linking of Canadian scholars' accounts to a persistent identifier; as a DataCite Canada member, the Canadian HSS Commons facilitates DOI minting for all items deposited in its open access repository.

How Does the Canadian HSS Commons Meet the Needs of *HSS & DH* Researchers?

As a field repository, the Canadian HSS Commons facilitates significant disciplinary and interdisciplinary connections, both domestically and internationally, à la platforms such as arXiv and the Humanities Commons. However, unlike arXiv (which archives articles from STEM fields) and even more specialized repositories such as PubMedCentral (which archives articles

from biomedical and life sciences), it facilitates the publication not only of articles, but of research in many forms: abstracts, bibliographies, books and book chapters, charts, code, software, conference papers, course materials, documentaries, essays, fictional works, finding aids, images, interviews, maps, music, podcasts, syllabi, theses, and more. The Commons' support for such a wide range of formats and file types signals its tacit recognition that research in the humanities is increasingly "data-driven," as Borgman (2009) observed more than a decade ago, but also—as Dan Sinykin argued just this April—that data-driven research must be reclaimed as an important part of the humanities' history and ongoing fight for survival (2021). What is more, the Commons' inclusion of podcasts alongside PDFs, and datasets alongside dissertations, reflects the truly impressive variety of traditional as well as non-traditional activities and outputs on display in HSS communities, including those that have long been represented in the expanded—and still-expanding—field of DH.

However, the Canadian HSS Commons is interested in more than the publication and sharing of data, whatever form(s) that data may take: in addition to these essential functions, it also facilitates the creation, management, and promotion of new or ongoing research projects. DH emphasizes collaboration, exploration, making and building, and data management—and these, too, are all research activities the Commons supports. For example, the project development space (see Fig. 1), allows researchers to assign roles and edit permissions; keep track of shared or individual to-do items and milestones; communicate with team members or the public; share updates, files, and wikis internally or publicly; and collaborate using tools such as GitHub, Google Drive, and Dropbox—that is, the same kinds of tools that many people in DH already use on a regular basis.
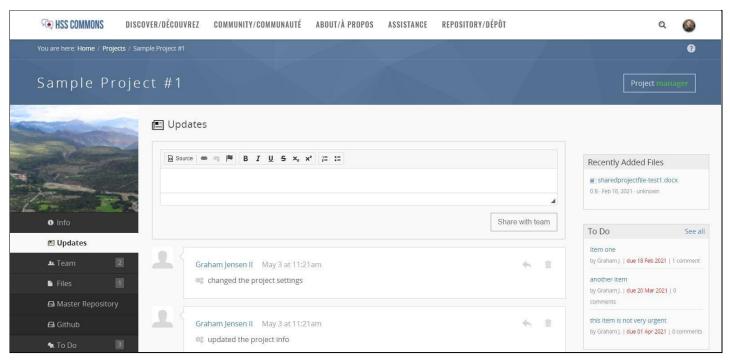

Figure 1. The Canadian HSS Commons project development space.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In the next phase of development, the Canadian HSS Commons team will be improving all areas of the site in response to feedback that we have received from the researchers, librarians, policy makers, and other members of the INKE Partnership and Canadian-Australian Partnership for Open Scholarship (CAPOS). We will also be strengthening new and existing relationships with Canadian scholarly societies, research organizations, and digital research infrastructure providers as part of our attempt to reimagine the commons for the HSS community and beyond.

As for the platform itself (to give just one example in closing), we are considering adding a field to the project development space to prompt users to upload a data management plan (DMP). Given the new Tri-Agency requirements concerning RDM and DMPs noted above, it is clear that Canadian research commons like ours must soon find new ways to use digital infrastructure to support responsible, open scholarship. More than that, it is increasingly imperative that such platforms do so in line not only with evolving best practices across disciplines, but also the funding and incentive systems that enforce these practices, influencing the future direction of scholarship in its national and international contexts.

By building an inclusive virtual commons for—and in consultation with—the Canadian DH and HSS communities, we hope to address the social, economic, and institutional pressures outlined above. In the process, and in the course of our ongoing research into the social, economic, and institutional pressures operative in digital spaces, we also hope to play a significant role in supporting the kinds of open, self-reflexive, and collaborative practices that have already begun to positively transform the expanded fields in which we work.

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