

FOREWORD*

American Council of Learned Societies Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities

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1 Foreword

I am pleased to commend Our Cultural Commonwealth to what I hope will be the many readers who will find in the report a vision of the future and a guide to realizing that future.

One role of the American Council of Learned Societies is to convene scholars and institutional leaders to consider challenges important to the advancement of humanistic studies in all fields. The effective and efficient implementation of digital technologies is precisely such a challenge. It is increasingly evident that new intellectual strategies are emerging in response to the power of digital technologies to support the creation of humanistic knowledge. Innovative forms of writing and image creation proliferate in arts and letters, with many new works accessible and understood only through digital media. Scholars are increasingly dependent on sophisticated systems for the creation, curation, and preservation of information. In 2004, therefore, ACLS asked John Unsworth, Dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, to chair a Commission on Cyberinfrastructure in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Dean Unsworth selected the other members of the Commission and its advisers, who worked with dedication and determination. The analysis and recommendations of this report are theirs, but the responsibility for grappling with the issues they present lies with the wider community of scholarship and education.

The convergence of advances in digital technology and humanistic scholarship is not new. Indeed, this publication is at least the sixth major report focused on technology and scholarship in the humanities and interpretive social sciences issued by our Council. ¹In 1965, ACLS began a program of providing fellowships to scholars whose projects experimented with “computer aided research in the humanities.” A forty-year-old statement of that program’s purpose remains convincing: “Of course computers should be used by scholars in the humanities, just as microscopes should be used by scientists. . . [t]he facts and patterns that they—and often they alone—can reveal should be viewed not as the definitive answers to the questions that humanists have been asking, but rather as the occasion for a whole range of new and more penetrating and more exciting questions.” ²For the past forty years increasing numbers of individual scholars have validated and re-validated that assertion. We now have arrived at the point, however, where we cannot rely on individual

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¹Herbert C. Morton and Anne J. Price, *The ACLS Survey of Scholars: The Final Report of Views on Publications, Computers, and Libraries* (Washington: University Press of America, 1989). Herbert C. Morton et al, *Writings on Scholarly Communication: An Annotated Bibliography of Books and Articles on Publishing, Libraries, Scholarly Research, and Related Issues* (University Press of America, 1988). *Scholarly Communication: The Report of the National Enquiry*, (John Hopkins University Press, 1979). “Computerized Research in the Humanities,” *ACLS Newsletter*, Special Supplement, June 1966. Pamela Pavliscak, Seamus Ross, and Charles Henry, “Information Technology in Humanities Scholarship: Achievements, Prospects, and Challenges—The United States Focus,” *ACLS Occasional Paper #37*, 1997.

²Charles Blitzer, “This Wonderful Machine: Some Thoughts on the Computer and the Humanities,” *ACLS Newsletter*, Vol. XVII, April 1966, No. 4.

enterprise alone. This report is therefore primarily concerned not with the technological innovations that now suffuse academia, but rather with institutional innovations that will allow digital scholarship to be cumulative, collaborative, and synergistic.

Those institutional innovations are the “cyberinfrastructure” advocated by the following pages. We are grateful to the National Science Foundation and to Dan Atkins, who chaired the NSF Advisory Panel on Cyberinfrastructure that issued in 2003 a report on the subject, for giving the term currency and meaning. (Dr. Atkins also served as an adviser to the ACLS Commission.) In addition to the “Atkins report,” the NSF commissioned a report on the cyberinfrastructure needs of the more quantitative social sciences.³ With the publication of *Our Cultural Commonwealth*, which concerns the humanities and interpretive social sciences, we now have all of the fields of the arts and sciences in common cause.

ACLS’s earlier reports focused within the academy and concerned the potential of new information technologies to empower research on traditional objects of study. That orientation is the starting point for this effort, and the evidence there is compelling. But the widespread social adoption of computing is transforming the very subjects of humanistic inquiry. In 2006 most expressions of human creativity in the United States—writing, imaging, music—will be “born digital.” The intensification of computing as a cultural force makes the development of a robust cyberinfrastructure an imperative for scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. Political scientists must take account not only of polling data, but of the blogosphere. Architectural historians must be able to analyze computer-aided design. What we once called “film studies” increasingly will be research on digital media. If these materials are to be preserved and accessible, if they are to be searched and analyzed, we must have the human and institutional capacities called for in this report.

Many thanks are in order. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation provided essential resources: the Foundation’s financial support made the report possible, and the advice and counsel of Program Officer Donald J. Waters helped refine it. Many institutions extended themselves in providing venues for the public sessions that helped form the report: the New York Public Library; Northwestern University; the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Southern California; the Research Libraries Group; the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Numerous scholarly leaders gave presentations to the Commission, and many others submitted comments on earlier drafts of this report. I wish to express thanks also to Abby Smith, who served first as Senior Editor and subsequently as an adviser to the Commission; to Marlo Welshons, the report’s editor, who worked tirelessly yet cheerfully to bring together the words and ideas of the report’s many authors and reviewers; and to Sandra Bradley, who helped maintain the Commission’s own infrastructure.

This report addresses its recommendations to college and university leaders, to funders, to scholars, and to the public that ultimately supports the scholarly and educational enterprise. It is heartening to know that some of the recommendations of the report already are being acted upon. With the support of the Mellon Foundation, ACLS has begun offering Digital Innovation Fellowships designed to advance digital scholarship and to exemplify the infrastructure necessary for further advances. Chairman Bruce Cole’s announcement of the Digital Humanities Initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities is especially promising. One early fruit of that initiative is a new partnership between the Endowment and the Institute for Museum and Library Services to help teachers, scholars, museums, and libraries work together to advance digital scholarship and present it to the widest possible public. The John D. And Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation has begun a major new effort to understand and develop digital technologies for learning in early education. We can hope that other foundations and funders will join the Mellon Foundation in extending that focus to higher education. The ACLS remains committed to continuing its work in this area through the direct support of scholars and by cooperating with our member societies in hopes of providing leadership in this rapidly changing domain.

“Commonwealth” is defined both as “a body or number of persons united by a common interest,” and as the “public welfare, general good or advantage.” With this report the former meaning, as represented by the Commission and ACLS, presents a framework for action that, we believe, will advance the latter, the general good.

³Francine, Berman and Henry Brady, “Final Report: NSF SBE-CISE Workshop on Cyberinfrastructure and the Social Sciences” www.sdsc.edu/sbe/ (<<http://www.sdsc.edu/sbe/>>).

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