Serendipity in the Digital Humanities

Event Details
Date: Wednesday 24 June 2015
Time: 6pm
Venue: Webb Lecture Theatre, Geography Building UWA
Parking: P18 & 20, Fairway entrance 3
Cost: Free, but RSVP essential via www.ias.uwa.edu.au/lectures/burrows

Nostalgia for the alleged serendipity of the physical library remains a persistent (though disputed) trope in the digital era. There have even been attempts to mimic this kind of "accidental discovery" in the context of digital library services, as well as in search engines more broadly. Regardless of the merits of these initiatives, there seems to be a general acknowledgement that serendipity plays a significant role for humanities researchers – or at least that their research tends to incorporate the making of what appear to be accidental or fortuitous connections between apparently unrelated phenomena. In a digital environment dominated by the single search box, how can this kind of approach be encouraged and designed for?

This presentation will look at serendipity in the context of humanities research processes generally.

Why are classification and categorization so important? What do we mean by "data" in the humanities? What are the implications of new techniques for organizing knowledge for humanities research – including ontologies, social tagging and graph databases?

Two projects will be used to illustrate these recently developed approaches. "Reconstructing the Phillipps Collection" brings together data about the history and provenance of 40,000 European manuscripts which were once part of the collections of Sir Thomas Phillipps. Organizing this large collection of heterogeneous data for analysis and exploration has required the use of innovative methods involving graph databases and Linked Data.

The Humanities Networked Infrastructure (HuNI) service (http://huni.net.au) aggregates data from over thirty cultural datasets produced in Australia. More than 730,000 named entities have been extracted from these datasets and made available for HuNI users to explore. HuNI is intended to support the kind of non-linear and associative research methods practiced in the humanities. It aims to encourage structured serendipity by enabling users to create their own links and associations in the data, within a loose framework of categorization.

About Toby Burrows
Toby Burrows currently holds a European Union Marie Curie Fellowship in the Department of Digital Humanities at King’s College London. He was previously the manager of the eResearch Support Unit in The University of Western Australia Library. He has been involved in a series of Australian projects to develop digital infrastructure for humanities researchers, notably the national Humanities Networked Infrastructure (HuNI). He has a PhD in medieval history from The University of Western Australia and has previously held visiting fellowships at Churchill College Cambridge and the Free University in Amsterdam.

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