The Chrysalis Project: Vertically Integrated Research Alliances

PI: Dr. Martin Halbert (UNT), Co-PI: Katherine Skinner (Educopia), Project Manager: Christina Drummond (Educopia)

EDUCOPIA INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES UNT

Summary

How can we collectively design systems and organizations that will most effectively sustain innovative new varieties of digital scholarship over time? In a one year planning grant, this project gathered community feedback on the concept of using vertically integrated research alliances (VIRAs) to promote and sustain innovative digital scholarship. Focus groups and interviews engaged scholars, libraries, and scholarly presses engaged in humanities scholarship around Texana history, Coerced Migration studies, and Southern United States history. Critical issues impacting the ability of stakeholders to sustain digital scholarship were documented alongside a literature review of current digital scholarship sustainability research. The project produced a white paper detailing the VIRA model and recommendations for implementing one or more research alliances, including one for the study of coerced migration.
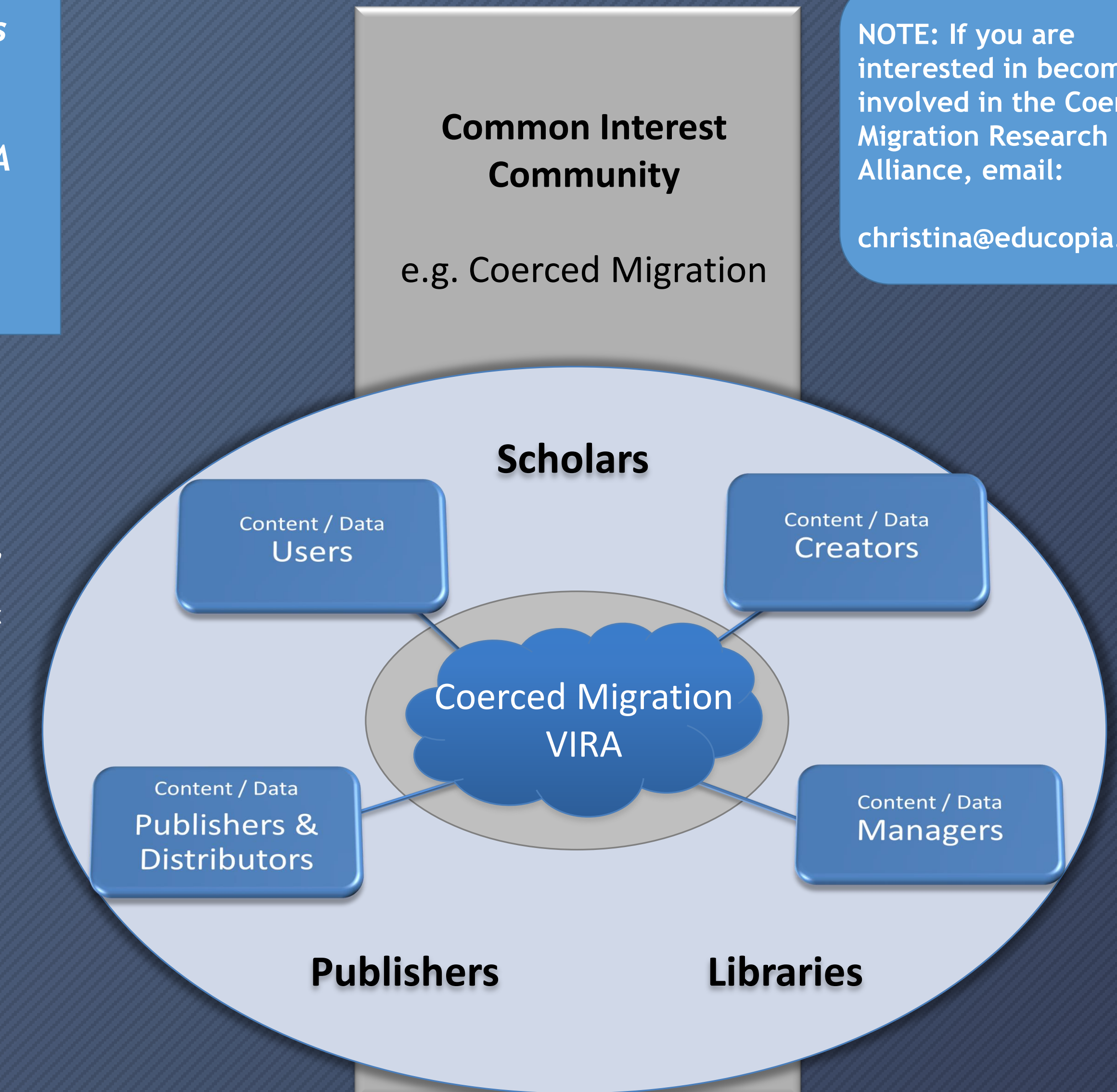
Findings

- The combination of longstanding instabilities in the current system of scholarly communication and the promise of new digital forms of collaborative scholarship have brought us to a critical transformative moment. Like the chrysalis transformation of organisms with a pupal life stage, reforming scholarship in particular subject domains into research alliances of scholars, libraries, and publishers could create more sustainable organizational forms.

- Feedback from a broad range of stakeholders demonstrates that the idea of developing a closer collaborative model which includes subject-focused cross-sections of scholars, libraries, and publishers was compelling and shows promise, but implementing the model would entail working out many specific details in practice.

- There are a wide range of antecedents to the VIRA (many of which have a long history) that we can learn from and build on. Examples of such antecedents include learned societies, research centers, and other collaborative research organizations. By building on these existing models, VIRAs may be easier to understand and better able to learn from best practices identified in operating these antecedent organizations.

- If any particular prospective VIRA is to succeed, scholars must be committed conceptually to the subject domain under consideration, and practically to the effort required to mobilize and contribute to the ongoing operation of the alliance. The biggest risk factor involved in creating VIRAs may be that scholars are too divergent in motivations, level of commitment, and ability to collaborate effectively in this way with other stakeholders.

- To be viable, a VIRA must have a sufficiently critical mass of content, motivated scholars, and committed institutions. An "alliance" is inherently a community, and cannot be limited to a handful of individuals or a single institution. Without sufficient scale, VIRAs will not be healthy or even viable organizations.

- It may be better to develop a strong shared sense of community first and then use that sense of community to seek out revenue streams rather than the other way around.

- The revenue streams that sustain a VIRA need not solely or primarily resemble those that have sustained traditional forms of scholarship. Rather than purchases and subscriptions, VIRAs might be sustained through combinations of other approaches associated with social entrepreneurship such as crowdfunding, memberships (both individual and institutional), fund-raisers, and donations.

- Actual case studies surface the issues in implementing VIRAs. One or more of the three exploratory case studies undertaken in this planning project, or some other set of case studies should be carried forward to assess the VIRA model. We intend to do so in a new project to implement a VIRA on the interdisciplinary study of Coerced Migration.

Coerced Migration Research Alliance

Next steps on this project will include the creation of a VIRA for the study of Coerced Migration.

NOTE: If you are interested in becoming involved in the Coerced Migration Research Alliance, email:

christina@educopia.org

This prospective research alliance of scholars, libraries, and presses will study the broad topics associated with coerced migration, including slavery, refugees, and economic displacement.

This topical framing ("coerced migration") has been articulated and advocated by scholars noted for their work on several innovative digital scholarship projects in this topical area (see below).

Common Interest Community

e.g. Coerced Migration

Scholars

Content / Data Users

Content / Data Creators

Coerced Migration VIRA

Content / Data Publishers & Distributors

Content / Data Managers

Publishers   **Libraries**

Creating a meaningful research alliance for this subject domain would involve a broad range of activities such as comparative analytical use of coerced migration datasets, normalizing data, and the creation of standards for storing, analyzing, using, and disseminating such datasets. The tremendous power of collaboratively assembling such datasets in portals has been demonstrated in projects that the various historians and sociological researchers brought together for this discussion, notably including the Voyages portal previously mentioned, the *Social Conflict in Africa Database* (https://www.strausscenter.org/scad.html), the *Texas Slavery Project* (http://www.texasslaveryproject.org), and others.

Scholars leading the intellectual development of the Coerced Migration Research Alliance include Dr. David Eltis, who led the creation of two major digital scholarship resources: the *Transatlantic Slave Voyages* database (http://www.slavevoyages.org) and the *African Origins* database (http://www.african-origins.org). Dr. Eltis and various other scholars involved in the study of either slavery or refugee studies articulated the possibilities in creating a cooperative research alliance focused on coerced migration.