



Post-digital humanities

Description

This week I'll participate in a round table discussion about the digital humanities at an event called [Methodological Intersections](#) at the Trier Digital Humanities Autumn School in Trier, Germany. We've been presented with 5 questions, which I've reformulated here in my own words – with some tentative responses.

Q1: The digital humanities (DH) presents itself as cross disciplinary. Does the idea of the digital humanities weaken the institutional legitimacy of the humanities by blurring the distinction between each of its disciplines. Would terms such as *digital history*, *digital linguistics*, or *digital human geography* strengthen the humanities?

A: The introduction of digital technologies has not broken down the distinctions between the natural sciences. So it shouldn't destabilise the humanities in that way. If anything the incursion of digital technologies has been accompanied by greater specialisation in the sciences.

Perhaps the creative arts provide a better model. Architecture, music, art, product design, illustration, dance – these have had to deal with digital technologies from the 1960s, with a range of responses: from antagonism between the ‘techies’ and the reactionary ‘romantics’ in the early days, to recognising the pivotal role of digital technologies in professional practice (computer-aided design for example), to an enthusiasm for experimentation with digital media. (The *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition in 1968 at the ICA in London provides a useful milestone.)



Digital technologies in the arts and humanities disciplines that are aligned to professional and creative practice have an easier road than “more academically oriented” humanities disciplines. In fact colleagues and I working in the creative arts are bemused by the term “digital humanities.” If anything it serves to define a group of disciplines for which digital technologies still constitute an uncomfortable novelty, as if technology is somehow external to the discipline. That can’t be good for the credibility of a field.

Q2: Do the digital humanities (DH) demonstrate the success and longevity of the humanities in an academic culture dominated by the sciences, or do the DH simply reinforce the scientific view that social and intellectual challenges are best addressed via (digital) technologies (E. Morozov).

A: I think the latter. Adding “digital” before the name of a discipline looks out of date, especially as people have been talking about the “post-digital” for a while now. See [When did we become post-digital?](#) It’s cooler to think about using the best tools to tackle the job at hand, neither all digital nor all “conventional.”

To emphasise the digital, which is also to channel funding in that direction, now looks like an attempt to legitimate technological solutions to difficult (wicked) problems. See [Wicked problems revisited](#). But there is always a need to research, explore, develop and evaluate new technologies, their implications and the social and cultural contexts in which they come about.

Q3: DH scholarship embraces the digitization, collection, cataloging and distribution of cultural assets (R. Rosenzweig). Is it now the job of the DH to interpret these assets in our research, to train others to use the digital tools, and to develop skills in critical digital literacy?

A: That to me is very important. But it’s worth emphasising that these critical intellectual tools are in fact sourced from the humanities. How else can we understand and critique other than through a sense of history, politics, law, languages, literature and cultural theory – not to mention philosophy and its many sub disciplines and flavours, including ethics and aesthetics? So critical engagement is not external to the humanities but central to it. Also see [The big book of hermeneutics](#) for evidence of the scope of hermeneutical studies (Geisteswissenschaften).

If anything the humanities have a vital role in informing the sciences, the social sciences, and the arts. It’s sometimes disturbing to hear intelligent radio and television anchors interview *brain scientists* (and [technology writers](#)) who now claim authority over the human condition via a highly selective knowledge of intellectual history.

Q4: Do the digital humanities emphasise traditional textual content and analysis as opposed to visual and audio modes of critical creative practice? Are we also ignoring emerging digital native objects and practices?

A: Text is of course easier to store and submit to [big data analytics](#). But visual, sonic and ephemeral assets are the most demanding and interesting for digital curators, and in my line of work provide the most spectacular evidence of the value of digital repositories – think of the Google image search feature, scanned manuscripts and drawings, CAD and 3D models, etc.

If we think about what’s happening to social media, it’s now less about text messages (status updates), and more about sharing pictures, with captions added. So if anything it’s the idea of text pure and simple that’s under threat. Text now comes with other stuff attached.

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Can scholars ignore digital assets that are not simply representations of physical artefacts? Scholars of periodised historical study (e.g. 18th century factory produced bone china) may be less interested in assets native to digital media. But increasingly researchers draw on digitally archived film and audio recordings of what earlier scholars have said about a subject, digital reconstructions of objects, models of processes, and digital means of communication and knowledge exchange.

If by digital natives we mean the study of contemporary popular cultural forms such as video games, graphic novels, comic conventions, social media transactions, and digital subcultures, then these are available for study in the humanities much like any other cultural product.

Q5: What is the future of the digital humanities?

A: The humanities disciplines will persist and transform, as disciplines do. “Digital humanities” is a temporary term that has, or had, some political clout. The cost has been that it appears to divide the humanities into the progressives and the reactionaries. I think there are other more interesting binaries to deal with.



Also see [What’s wrong with the digital humanities](#).

Bibliography

- Morozov, Evgeny. 2011. *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World*. London: Allen Lane
- Rosenzweig, Roy. 2006. Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past. *The Journal of American History*, (93) 1, 117-146.

Notes

- Images on this page: Easels stored in a corner of the Sculpture Court, Edinburgh College of Art; a selfie with PhD student and two supervisors (processed via the Waterlogue app); an art shop in Dundas Street, Edinburgh.

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Date Created

September 26, 2015

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