



What happened to the digital humanities?

Description

â??I guess I should spell out that the digital humanities are not, in my view, the logical future of the humanities in the time of AI.â?•

That quote is from a recent book, *Humanities in the Time of AI*, by literary scholar Laurent Dubreuil (p.85).

That book helps me in updating my post of 10 August 2014 #208 [Whatâ??s wrong with the digital humanities](#). There, I referred to the so-called [Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0](#) of 2011 that highlighted the emergence of new scholarly practices. These advocated for interdisciplinary collaborations, openness to diverse methods and problem framings, and the â??democratization of culture and scholarship.â?•

It seems that Wikipedia demonstrated the power of the online sharing economy in allowing anyone to share data and scholarly information. We needed Web 2.0 to show us â??a truly global, multilingual authorship and editorial collective for gathering, creating, and managing information.â?•

But scholars were already questioning the digital humanities (DH) moniker. In a [posting](#) in 2011, media scholar Shannon Mattern problematized the definition. She noted a conference panel discussion that featured comments such as, â??Iâ??ve been working with digital archives for 15 years. I was a digital humanist before there even was such a term!â?•

Schooled in CAD and teaching digital media, thatâ??s how I felt at the time. However, I suspected from my various roles in a university College of Humanities and Social Sciences that some scholars in fields such as History, Art History, Literature, Classics, Philosophy and Religious Studies were prepared to declare a new area of specialism that required them to import expertise alien to the core of their fields.

My field of Architecture had long defined itself as a technical, engineering, scientific and humanities based discipline. So, the newness of a sub-specialism that attached words like â??digital,â?• â??informatics,â?• â??computational,â?• or â??data,â?• struck us as an unnecessary and outdated way of directing institutional expansion and recruitment strategies. In that light, some would think my

Chair of Architectural Computing as anachronistic.

Fields that attached themselves to the notion of *design*, thought it unnecessary to single out digital activity from the regular evolution of academic practice. I think similar skepticism applied to practice-oriented fields such as Music, Archaeology and Art & Design.

Around the time of my 2014 post I presented at a conference that gathered under the rubric of digital humanities. I had mistakenly assumed that papers would assert a historical sensibility, the importance of philosophy, cultural theory, inter-disciplinarity, the interpretive arts and design into discussions of data and digital media themes courted in Dubreuil's book 2025 by the way.

Most of the presentations were from archive and library studies, which for me was fascinating and new. As stated in the Manifesto, the ambition of the digital humanities was to elevate archival practices.

The Manifesto railed against the traditionalists. Apparently this old guard thought that gathering, storing, sorting and cataloguing artefacts and information was outside the mainstream.

Whereas the modern university segregated scholarship from curation, demoting the latter to a secondary, supportive role, and sending curators into exile within museums, archives, and libraries, the Digital Humanities revolution promotes a fundamental reshaping of the research and teaching landscape.

Boosted by the power of networked digital databases, the DH moniker helped bring archival practices and their implications to the centre, inaugurating many other new practices in its wake.

AI Humanities

By default, Google search commonly invokes an AI summary via its Gemini generative AI model. So a search on AI Humanities yields a structured discursive response before its customary list of relevant websites.

Such AI-generated summaries go beyond definitions. They reference recent relevant sources, the context of my query, and invite further user prompting.

As an example, click this Google link to a recent search query: [AI Humanities in Architecture](#). The result in my case references my institution and the city of Edinburgh. It will be different for users in other contexts.

The immediacy of such human-computer interaction already presents a significant assault on scholarship. In some cases it reduces the need to recount the basic background of a topic. So I don't now feel I need to rehearse the scope of AI Humanities in this article. That can save time and words for other topics.

On the other hand, the AI responses can also overwhelm the scholar. Do I need to check the accuracy of the AI responses? Should I follow up all the leads? Too much opportunity leads to a form of intellectual paralysis. I recall how the gift of a bumper pack of 1000 used postage stamps terminated my adolescent stamp collecting hobby. Will AI's profligacy similarly curb scholarly pastimes?

Orthodoxy

I won't provide a summary of the excellent book *Humanities in the Time of AI*. ChatGPT and Google can do that!

Dubreuil inserted some of his own ChatGPT interactions into the book. That's an interesting emerging academic practice. (See my book [AI and Language in the Urban Context](#).)

His brazen prompt "Write the chapter entitled 'We Are Not AI'• elicited a chapter sketch from the AI that included phrases such as

"Embracing Our Humanity: Reflecting on the unique qualities that make us human and the value of preserving our human identity; Emphasizing the importance of maintaining a balance between technological advancements and our human essence."

I concur that Dubreuil's chapter as written was richer and more provocative than the AI sketch. Though the word "nuance" appears often in ChatGPT responses, in its putative patterning from a massive repository of texts, it delivers something that looks like an averaging. Dubreuil explains this better:

"I clearly hear the parlance of orthodoxy filtered through the electronic loudspeaker. How far away I wish we were standing from that buzz. We do not have a 'humanity' or an 'essence' or an 'identity' to 'embrace' or to 'preserve' from autotelic and external 'technological advancements.' We should not be 'maintaining a balance' and attempting to avoid 'redefining' ourselves."

In highlighting what we are *not*, such interactions help in reformulating what we are, defining more clearly what we think.

"because 'AI' is also the unexpected name for a particular way of seeing the human as an organized, 'unique' 'essence' to protect from its outside; we can understand that our mental 'tools' and all that comes with them are also a provocation for redefining our noetic expression in, and through, the humanities" (p.26).

As a further example of the AI-induced amplification of orthodoxy, WordPress.com will generate an excerpt up to 100 words of a post, and in various styles (informal, optimistic, humorous, etc).

The default 20-word excerpt for this newsletter came up as "The digital humanities face scrutiny as AI reshapes scholarship, questioning prior definitions and institutional advancements in humanities disciplines."

I think that overstates the agency of AI. It presumes the legitimacy of "digital humanities" as a moniker. It also ignores my attempt to source some counter views. That said, AI summaries can serve as a prompt to make clear the argument I am presenting, or at least to provide a better summary.

Bibliography

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Note

- Featured image is from a recent visit to the courtyard of the Old Bodleian Library in the University of Oxford.

Category

1. Architecture
2. Artificial Intelligence
3. Podcast

Tags

1. humanities

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