

# Revisiting connotations of digital humanists: Exploration based on semi-structured interviews and survey

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## Introduction

This poster revisits the connotations of the umbrella term “digital humanists” by positioning it in the rapidly developing field of digital humanities (DH). The wide participation in DH from scholars, researchers, and practitioners coming from various knowledge domains and fields (Ma & Li, 2021; Jänicke, 2016) provides a good opportunity to rethink if advances in digital technologies and cross-field collaboration practices have impacted research communities’ collective understandings of “digital humanists,” including what the term refers to and how the term shapes the dynamics of the DH field. Particularly, in this poster, I explore the reasons why and why not a researcher would self-identify as a digital humanist.

## Related Work

Who is and who is not a digital humanist is a classic question in DH research literature? Early deliberations of “digital humanists” have emphasized the humanist orientation for the term. Alvarado (2012) discussed that a “digital humanist” should be someone who (1) aims to develop the deep domain knowledge of the traditional humanist, (2) learns a wide variety of technologies and programming languages, and (3) critically situates the technologies as cultural artifacts participating in the production of social and cognitive structures. This demonstrates that a “digital humanist,” to Alvarado’s imagination, should be a versatile researcher who both has deep knowledge of humanities research and a great mastery of digital technologies and programming. Ramsay (2011) at the same time situates “digital humanists” as humanities scholars who “can build something with digital methods.” This understanding has a broader stance on what is included in “digital methods” and does not emphasize digital humanists’ abilities to write codes or programs. Despite the different ideas about digital humanists’ technological literacy and programming proficiency, early understandings of the term suggest the main component of DH workforce and labor landscape were humanities researchers. However, as disciplinary boundaries blur and converge, interdisciplinary collaborations deepen, and an increasing number of scholars from non-humanities fields enter the DH landscape (Wang, 2018; Tang et al., 2017), it becomes a meaningful moment to revisit the collective perceptions of “digital humanists” in the current DH landscape.

## Questions and Methods

Situated in this background, I ask: Why or why not does a researcher or practitioner self-identify as a digital humanist? By means of answering this question, I discuss what the current perceptions of a “digital humanist” among DH research communities are, whether they are different from early connotations, and how they are potentially affected by the current work practices and labor structure of DH. Methodologically, I use a combination of qualitative semi-structured interviews and quantitative survey methods to explore the research question. For the preliminary study, I recruited fourteen participants who have been actively engaged in DH research projects for 30-minute semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, I collected participants’ demographic information, particularly their fields of research, academic positions, and the major research questions they explore in their work. I also asked participants to indicate if they self-identify as digital humanists, based on their respective understandings of the term, and explain why. Preliminary results showed that researchers’ self-identification varies, and such variance is impacted by the nature of research questions and researchers’ self-evaluation of their digital literacy. In the following survey, I will test the above observations with larger datasets. I explore which components of digital literacy matter the most for researchers’ self-identification as digital humanists, which types of research questions ground their decisions and their sense of belonging, and how they make sense of the highly interdisciplinary field of practice and critically think of themselves as (or not as) part of it. Findings of this study will help us better understand the connotations of “digital humanists” as of today and the construction of collective identities of DH researchers and practitioners.

## Bibliography

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