



Revisiting Connotations of Digital Humanists: Exploratory Interviews

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Abstract

This ongoing study revisits the connotations of “digital humanists” and explores the reasons why a researcher does or does not self-identify as a digital humanist. Building on semi-structured interview data collected from fourteen researchers and practitioners engaging in digital humanities (DH) projects, this poster illustrates researchers’ various understandings of “digital humanist” as a term and highlights the complexity of “digital humanists” as a research community. This study provides insights into the collective imaginations of “digital humanist” as a research community.

Background: Who is in and who is out? Early deliberations of digital humanists

- ❑ **Alvarado (2012):** 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.
- ❑ **Ramsay (2011):** A (humanities) scholar who can build something with digital methods.
- ❑ **Jänicke (2016):** Inclusive conception of digital humanists, advocating for active participation from researchers of various knowledge domains, especially those from scientific fields.

Research Questions

- RQ 1:** How do researchers currently understand the connotations of “digital humanists” as a research identity?
- RQ 2:** Why do (or do not) researchers self-identify as a digital humanist?

Qualitative Semi-structured Interviews

- 1** Do you self-identify as a digital humanist, depending on your personal understanding of the term?
- 2** Why or why not?

Participants (n=14)

Inclusive screening criterion: Any researcher or practitioner who has been actively engaging in DH projects

- ❑ **8 DOMAINS:** History, religious studies, English, art history, sociology, information science, math, anthropology
- ❑ **6 LEVELS OF TRAINING:** Master’s students (n=2), PhD candidates (n=5), postdoc (n=1), assistant professors (n=4), associate professors (n=1), and curator (n=1).

Results

Researchers’ **self-confidence** in technical literacy and the **nature of research questions** affect their self-identification as a digital humanist.

Reason	Participant (n=8)	Example
Competent in digital methods (programming and coding in particular)	P2, P6, P7, P9, P11	“I have a background in anthropology and museum studies, and I know coding and know how to do data analysis. ...” (P9) “I can code and I use computational and quantitative methods to study literature.” (P11)
Active working, teaching, or supervising students in DH	P4, P10, P14	“I self-identify as a digital humanist in the same way as I self-identify as an information designer, a programmer, and a statistician. I do research in digital humanities, so I guess technically I can say I am a digital humanist.” (P4)

Table 1. Why do researchers self-identify as digital humanists?

Reason	Participant (n=6)	Example
Not a “humanist”	P12, P13	“I wouldn’t think I’m a humanist because my research question is not a humanities research question. I approach cultural heritage research from information science and design perspectives.... although I think what I’m doing is digital humanities work.” (P13)
Concerned with technical skills (programming in particular)	P8	“I just started learning programming and digital methods. Being a digital humanist will be my final goal, but I am not there yet.” (P8)
DH does not raise new research questions	P3	“...new constructs such as “DH” did not generate fundamentally new questions distinct from those in conventional or analog humanities.” (P3)
Digital methods are not necessary	P1, P5	“My research questions are not ultimately bound with digital methods; they can be addressed with digital methods, but not necessarily have to be.” (P5)

Table 2. Why do researchers NOT self-identify as digital humanists?

References

Alvarado, R. C. (2012). The digital humanities situation. In M. Gold (Ed.), *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. University of Minnesota Press.

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