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HUM 320

January 18, 2022

Defining Historiography and Digital Humanities

In searching how to define digital humanities, I came to learn that many of the first results relied on a previous familiarity with the classic discipline of humanities. I'd previously assumed digital humanities would be a study more interested in human behavior in online environments. As I'm not fortuitous enough to be a humanities major, I don't have much experience in gauging how deep each topic within the discipline may go, and reading up on different definitions ended up providing me one circuitous article after another.

Later in my search, however, I noticed a link for the Programs in Digital Humanities at MIT. Actual projects are a little bit more my pace, but even further, and after realizing the program had a public GitHub page, the code behind it all fluently spoke my language. I saw neural networks meant to analyze thousands of photos to understand their role in representing the world, a browser game portraying the scramble of gerrymandering, and simulations on the adoption of democracy and development in Africa. Examples like the machine-generated map of relationships within the global tobacco industry seem to demonstrate what digital humanities are in practice: a way to use technology in order to enhance and build upon the study of humanities. With technology, complicated simulations are able to answer many of the what-ifs scholars still hold. With the rate at which technology is currently evolving, classically impossible questions to answer without global impact are becoming ever more possible. The practice of digital humanities is a cooperative effort as



well—dozens of contributors commit code to public repositories with the intention of furthering knowledge of ourselves as a species. Pictured to the right are undergraduate researchers at the Digital Humanities Lab at MIT, many of which are building the systems required to venture into this relatively unexplored territory.

Historiography, somewhat easier to understand, can be defined as the study of how history is studied through the lens of cultural, temporal, and situational variables. As described by Carl Becker in his article for the *American Historical Review*: “What is Historiography?”, historiography can be used to deduce the value of historical accounts by modern standards. “From them he learns what were the defects and limitations of his predecessors ... as, for example, that Macaulay, although a brilliant writer, was blinded by Whig prejudice,” (Becker 20). It’s important to understand the setting in which history is written, as inaccurate or muddled accounts (and often both) are abound. Studying these differences would then allow us to have the clearest picture of history, and best learn for the future from what *actually* happened.

The intersection of these two disciplines seems to exist in everyday online occurrences. History is constantly being written online, whether it’s by a journalist polling for the *New York Times*, or by a blog writer posting a local recipe, or by an activist preaching on Twitter. Future generations will have the ability to watch our behavior now and study it for historical accuracy. Historiography thus concerns digital humanities—as analyzing digital populations to accurately describe history is an innately technological issue. The projects described above are all solutions to some sort of historiography inquiry. As each project in digital humanities helps to paint a virtual picture of the time we and others have lived in, an understanding of historiography is vital to comprehend its importance.

Works Cited

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