Emily Lopez, Graham Galloway, Hannah Shlesinger
Dr Brooks Jessup
Digital Humanities 101
21 June 2021

Bias and Exclusivity in the Digital Humanities

Is there such a thing as a 'neutral tool'? The biases of researchers and programmers often become embedded in their projects and tools in subtle ways. Framing research tools and technologies as free from bias has real consequences in a developing field like the digital humanities and will continue to perpetuate systems of structural inequality in academia.

In her article, "Why Are Digital Humanitie So White? Or Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation," Tara McPherson discusses how the development of the UNIX operating system coincided with the civil rights movements and cultural shifts of the 1960s. The user interface of UNIX hides complex computational processes from the user and interacts with a simplified "input/output" format. This user interface design mirrored contemporary ideas of racial "color blindness," in which one attempts to achieve a post-race society, but ignores the ways in which racism is embedded in deeper structural issues.

In "All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave" by Moya Bailey and "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities" by Kim Gallon, the authors discuss recent grassroot movements and organizations looking to recenter marginalized identities in conversations about the digital humanities. Gallon argues for increased discussion about how our historical definition of 'the humanities' reinforces racialized beliefs and systems. Gallon's approach to addressing the racial factor of computing focuses on the technological tools and methods that recover lost historical and literary texts. These, she explains, are valuable tools for the recovery of Black people's humanity. Both authors call for a deep, structural reimagining of the humanities in order to create a more interdisciplinary field rather than what Bailey calls the 'mix and stir' model of diversity that would simply tack on additional studies that incorporate topics of race and identity.

In "Maps, Mapmaking, and Critical Pedagogy: Exploring GIS and Maps as a Teaching Tool for Social Change," authors Denise Pacheco and Veronica Nelly Velez give a critical overview of how geographic information system mapping (GIS) is used within and influences the US education system. They also discuss new ways of including GIS in curriculums for young students. While maps have long been seen as objective displays of information, seemingly from a "God's eye view," the choice of what information is included in maps reflects the subjective worldview of the mapmaker. GIS often influences public policy such as school district boundaries and public school funding. Pacheco and Velez ask how maps like these might be different if a greater diversity of voices—such as students and teachers, rather than only public officials—contributed to them. They continue to explore ideas of how GIS can be used to display qualitative data along with quantitative data and as a tool for storytelling. The inclusion of more voices and critical race theory in GIS going forward allows us to address the technology's subjectivity and provides a tool to give marginalized communities representation. In their conclusion, the authors stress how their research is part of fulfilling their larger goal of challenging structural inequality.

These readings highlight the importance of understanding and addressing bias in the digital humanities. Ignoring the power systems, worldviews, and narratives that influence humanities research and digital technologies leads to the perpetuation of systems of structural inequality. Despite the perception of computers, data visualization software, and quantitative data as objective, it is important to remember that all technology is created by and all data is gathered by people whose cultural contexts, biases, worldviews, and identities influence their work in ways that must be recognized.