Chapter 14 - Public Humanities

Discussion Guide

# Introduction (5 minutes)

* Purpose of discussion
* Permission to record for notes
* 90 minutes

# Warm-up Discussion - Defining Public Humanities (30 minutes)

What do we mean by “Public”?

* **PROBE:** Public sector, government, federal, nonprofit, community-based organizations, general public, people

What are the “Public Humanities”?

* **PROBE:** What is the role of the public sector in fostering this discussion?
* **PROBE:** What is our role as scholars and students of the humanities?
* **PROBE:** Why should we have humanities discussions online between scholars and the public?

Here is a definition developed on Wikipedia in part in collaboration among M.A. students in the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities & Cultural Heritage. It has evolved over time among studies focused in Public Humanities. I’ve broken it down into its key components.

* **PROBE:** How does it compare to our definition?
* **PROBE:** Is it just the public sector’s work in this area? Can private organizations participate in this space? Individuals?
* **PROBE:** Is there anything missing from this definition?

What about the digital public humanities? How does public humanities differ in the digital space? What characteristics are associated with digital vs. traditional humanities?

* **PROBE:** What were the institutions and actors involved in the traditional public humanities space? Who is involved now?
* **PROBE:** Are the goals of the public humanities still the same?
* **PROBE:** What forms do these take? Archives, websites, maps etc…

# Challenges & Opportunities (70 minutes)

What are the risks associated with these discussions? What are the opportunities?

* **PROBE:** Intellectual Property, Ownership, Personal Attacks, Trolls,

## Personal Attacks & Trolls (20 minutes)

Animosity on the internet is not a new concept, this week we explored a number of articles chronicling negative reactions to publicly released projects and thought. These examples highlight different prejudices and forms of harassment enabled by engaging the public in discourse.

It may not be safe for everyone to participate actively or openly in the current online environment. How can this be mitigated? Should we discourage this kind of discussion online?

What about the creation of ‘safe spaces’ with a registration wall to participation (such as DH slack) where like-minded individuals come together with a collective etiquette for participation? What are the drawbacks to this approach? Benefits?

Would a digital etiquette shift be possible? How does this differ from an in-person setting?

## Public Perception of Subjects We Study (10 minutes)

In the articles this week about Sarah Bond’s experience, in addition to the personal attacks that she experienced, the issue of public perception and changing a narrative around certain humanities disciplines is also discussed.

What role can the digital humanities take in informing cultural sector productions and education to accurately portray history and human civilizations?

In the art of storytelling, how much leeway should be given when the subject is historical?

Can we expect the audience to be able to differentiate?

* Illustrative example: The Good Place vs. The 300

What did they get right? What did they get wrong? Does it matter?

## Intellectual Property & Ownership (20 minutes)

Who owns the intellectual property derived from public conversations? Who funds the underlying work product?

* **PROBE:** What is the advantage for an organization to participate?
* **PROBE:** How can we shift this discussion? Does it need to be shifted away from capital ownership of ideas and individualized commodity of knowledge and celebrity?

In order to continue an academic career, is there an expectation to foster an online brand? Why?

* **PROBE:** To become more widely accepted within the field with a set of stakeholders?
* **PROBE:** Is this different in the digital age to what it was before?
* **PROBE:** Shawn recently mentioned he has sterilized his online profile.
* **PROBE:** How does this differ from the private sector or other public-sector positions? Do the same pressures exist to create the ‘allure of expertise’?
* **PROBE:** Is this still important in a world where there is distrust of experts? More so?

How does the pressure to engage the public in activities impact what is being studied and the methods for these studies? What impact does this have on projects?

* **PROBE:** What are our goals as students of the humanities? How does this align with the current structure within academia? How has the digital environment shifted this?

## Authority & Anonymity (10 minutes)

We’ve already discussed the impact of anonymity on reactions to public projects. What about authority in the online space?

How does one balance the need for authoritative sources that are well-vetted with a need for some level of anonymity in order to preserve the privacy of the individual?

Are detractors more likely to target a named individual or an anonymous contributor?

## Inclusivity & Access (10 minutes)

How can digital tools and resources make cultural objects more accessible, engaging, and relevant to the personal and professional lives of various publics?

How do we define the relevant audiences of a project? Is the concept of starting with the audience first through the full design valid?

What kinds of projects require engagement with a community for the duration? Are there any that do not?

# Final Thoughts (20 minutes)

I want to try a bit of a projective technique with everyone. I’d like us all to imagine that we are a digital publishing platform creator for a space that would bring together all digital humanities work and get it to the public audience.

What is the ideal digital public humanities project result? How would it generate discourse? What characteristics would this discourse have?

If we were going to put together an etiquette and moderation guide for Digital Public Humanities, what would it need to include? What would it need to exclude?