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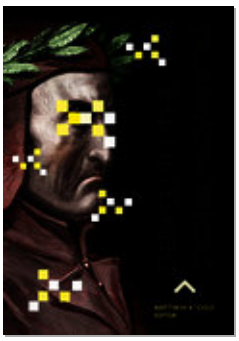
Debates in the Digital Humanities

Matthew K. Gold



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An Interview with Brett Bobley

MICHAEL GAVIN AND KATHLEEN MARIE SMITH

HASTAC, or the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory, is an interdisciplinary consortium committed to exploring the collaborative potential of the digital era. In February 2009, HASTAC scholars Kathleen Marie Smith and Michael Gavin asked Brett Bobley, director of the Office of the Digital Humanities for the National Endowment for the Humanities, his thoughts about "The Future of the Digital Humanities." The following interview originally appeared on the HASTAC website as one in a series of HASTAC Scholar Discussion Forums dealing with topics of interest to the digital humanities community.

1. What are the most interesting innovations happening right now in the field of digital humanities, and is it possible to predict or anticipate what will be most important in the future?

First, let me briefly explain what we mean by "digital humanities." I use "digital humanities" as an umbrella term for a number of different activities that surround technology and humanities scholarship. Under the digital humanities rubric, I would include topics like open access to materials, intellectual property rights, tool development, digital libraries, data mining, born-digital preservation, multimedia publication, visualization, GIS, digital reconstruction, study of the impact of technology on numerous fields, technology for teaching and learning, sustainability models, media studies, and many others. It became way too exhausting to recite that entire list whenever I spoke with someone, so "digital humanities" seemed to nicely summarize the issues. (Plus, it sounded better to me than "e-humanities," which is what I used to use!)

This long list of things related to digital humanities really reinforces why my staff is so busy—it is because the impact of technology on the humanities is so profound. As Tom Scheinfeldt has written, it is a game changer (Scheinfeldt). Some people wonder if game changing is an exaggeration, but let's put it this way: technology has radically changed the way we read, the way we write, and the way

we learn. Reading, writing, learning—three things that are pretty central to the humanities.

In terms of interesting innovations, I think a lot of them surround technology and how it helps you interact with humanities collections. At its heart, technology allows you to manipulate and interact with "stuff" in different ways. The stuff might be music; it might be video; it might be text; it might be images of objects. (It might even be people.) Before we look at humanities scholarship, let me throw out an analogy. Consider how, in a very short period of time, technology has changed popular music. Let's break music down to three key areas:

Access. Putting music in digital format has completely changed the access paradigm. I remember back when I was in college. I was the station manager for my campus radio station (University of Chicago, WHPK 88.5, "Cold kickin' it live!"). At the time, before the web and a few years before CDs came out, music was still remarkably regional. Whenever I was heading home to New York to visit my family, station DJs would ask me to buy records for them. Think about that for a moment—even in Chicago, one of the biggest cities in the country, there were many, many records you couldn't get your hands on. So in order to get the latest rap records coming out of New York or even a lot of imports from the UK, you had to fly to another city and bring vinyl back in your suitcase. The Internet completely and utterly changed that. Today, you can listen to a band from Australia as easily as one from your hometown.

Production and Distribution. Just a few years ago, it was nearly impossible for an unsigned band to get their music to a wide audience. Trust me, as the former head of a college radio station, most bands couldn't even make a demo tape that didn't sound horrible. But technology allows anyone with a home computer to record their music, and the web allows them to distribute it to anyone in the world.

Consumption (Listening). Digital files have enabled people to have much, much larger collections of music than they could physically store before. (Piracy helped, too, but that's another, related issue.) I carry my entire music collection on an iPod. This changes the way you listen, what you listen to, and the way you share music with others.

Now let's look at these three areas again (Access, Production, and Consumption) but in the context of humanities scholarship. What do humanists do? Well, a big part of what they do is study cultural heritage materials—books, newspapers, paintings, film, sculptures, music, ancient tablets, buildings, and so on. Pretty much everything on that list is being digitized in very large numbers. The change in access may not be quite as far along as it is for music, but it will be soon. Like with music, you'll have access to materials from all over the world. You won't have to send a book via airmail from New York to Chicago because you'll have instant access to it on your PC (or your mobile device). If you want to study materials in China, you'll be able to view them (or, for that matter, find out about them) using the web.

On the production side, we're already seeing more and more scholars producing their work for the web. It might take the form of scholarly websites, blogs, wikis,

or whatever. But as with music, a scholar (even an amateur, part-time scholar) can make her work available to the entire world at very low cost of production. After all, scholars still have to eat and so be compensated for what they do best—the analysis of scholarly materials and being part of the larger scholarly conversation (so production and transmission of knowledge). Plus, keep in mind that the entire production cycle uses technology (collecting, editing, discussing with others) before the final product is created.

On the consumption side, people get their materials in all kinds of new ways. Reading has changed with the web. It has changed from a technology perspective, of course—thinking of e-readers and laptops and mobile devices (and some of the now-starting-to-get-obsolete tech products like microfiche machines). But the changes are more profound than that. The way we read is changing—bits and pieces of varied content from so many places and perspectives.

If I had to predict some interesting things for the future in the area of access, I'd sum it up in one word: scale. Big, massive, scale. That's what digitization brings—access to far, far more cultural heritage materials than you could ever access before. If you're a scholar of, say, nineteenth-century British literature, how does your work change when, for the first time, you have every book from your era at your fingertips? Far more books than you could ever read in your lifetime. How does this scale change things? How might quantitative tech-based methodologies like data mining help you to better understand a giant corpus? Help you zero in on issues? What if you are a historian and you now have access to every newspaper around the world? How might searching and mining that kind of data set radically change your results? How might well-known assumptions in various disciplines fall once confronted with hard data? Or, perhaps, how might they be altered or reenvisioned?

2. How do you see digital technology transforming work in the disciplines of the humanities? Are there disciplines in which digital technology will have less of an impact?

In my earlier answer, I spoke about how access to large collections of digitized cultural heritage materials will transform the humanities. So let's also talk a bit about digital research tools and methodologies and their impact.

More and more scholars are starting to take advantage of digital research tools. Let me note that pretty much every scholar uses a digital tool for her work: namely, a word processor. And I'm sure there must be all kinds of interesting papers about how a word processor and its ability to edit and reedit on the fly has changed scholarship. But we don't even talk about a word processor as a digital tool anymore. But that's really the point here. What might seem novel at first can become accepted even by "regular" humanities scholars over time. There are all kinds of interesting tools and methodologies. I've been seeing a lot of really interesting uses for GIS—mapping places and events, over time, in a geographical space to help gain new

insight. Visualization is another technique that I think will become a great deal more common in the humanities. Scholars have always consumed materials to gain insight into why an event happened (or why the artist drew a painting that way, or why an ancient temple was constructed, etc.). Visualization may prove to be another technology that can help scholars see their materials in a new way.

There are many, many digital tools that scholars use every day to collaborate, to organize their work, and to publish it to the community. I suspect that many of these digital practices will become the norm. The tools will change (many will die out), but useful methods will stick. By the way, for a nice list of digital tools for the humanities, see Lisa Spiro's DiRT Wiki (Spiro).

Digital technology may impact some disciplines more than others. But frankly, this is hard to predict. Obviously, subdisciplines like game studies are very tech heavy. But who would have guessed that classics would be one of the most digitally savvy disciplines?

3. What roadblocks are scholars in the digital humanities encountering, and what advice do you have for graduate students and junior faculty?

The roadblock issue is much discussed. It seems like every conference I go to there is discussion of promotion and tenure issues, so this is certainly a big topic. Let me preface this by saying that I'm not a scholar myself; I'm a government grant maker and technologist. I say this because I want to make it clear that I can't speak authoritatively about how P&T (promotion and tenure) works on your campus. That said, my impression is that on some campuses, graduate students and junior faculty are strongly encouraged to steer away from digital scholarship and instead to write about "traditional" topics and publish "traditional" monographs. On the other hand, I do hear about more and more campuses where digital scholarship is highly valued and counted toward promotion.

I have a few thoughts here. First, I think it is important for people throughout the humanities community to understand that digital scholarship doesn't have to mean nontraditional. In other words, to get back to my word processor issue, have you ever heard someone say to a young philosopher, "Oh, you better not write your book about Aristotle using a *word processor*! Someone will think you're one of those crazy digital humanists and you won't get tenure!" This example seems silly, but keep in mind that it wasn't all that long ago that a word processor was newfangled technology. My point is that you can tackle "traditional" humanities topics and questions while still using the latest digital tools if you find it adds value to your work. Maybe you used data-mining techniques to see how Aristotle influenced other philosophers. That's great, but the focus of your book should be the results (the scholarship) and not necessarily the techniques you used.

One issue I'd like to see graduate programs tackle: more training in digital tools and methodologies for humanities scholarship. In the sciences, graduate students

learn how to use digital tools for research and analysis. But how many graduate humanities programs include classes on using GIS, 3-D modeling, data analysis, or other methods of scholarship? I suspect the number is fairly low. I wonder if this isn't an area more graduate programs should be exploring.

4. How will digital technology in the academic system in general (for example, in the changing role of textbooks in the classroom, open-access databases, or publishing requirements for tenure) affect the way research is performed and shared?
I think research will change a great deal over the next twenty years. We have already seen this in the sciences where mining "big data" has changed the way scientists do their research (Anderson). Imagine a future where we have huge digital libraries of far more material than you ever had access to before. Now imagine automatic language translation for those documents, which greatly increases your ability to study documents from around the globe.

Let's face it: sometimes scholarship is constrained by seemingly mundane hurdles like copyright, travel costs, or language barriers. Let's take art history for a moment. If you're an art historian and you want to write a book about French painters and you get the rights to reproduce the paintings of Renoir but not Monet, which artist will you choose to focus on? You'll probably write a lot more about Renoir for strictly practical reasons. What if you're a political philosopher and you can read English, French, and Greek but not Chinese? Might there be incredible literature in Chinese that would help you understand how ideas moved through cultures and across languages? But if you can't read it, you probably won't focus on it.

5. Many of the NEH's programs involve collaboration with other institutions. What does the NEH need from administrators and researchers to make successful programs?
In the Office of Digital Humanities, we're looking for really cool projects to fund! Of course, being the government, I can't exactly make the peer review criteria "coolness factor" and expect the lawyers to be OK with that! In all seriousness, though, we're looking for innovative projects that demonstrate how technology can be brought to bear on a humanities problem and, ultimately, yield great scholarship for use by a variety of audiences, whether it be scholars, students in a formal classroom setting, or the interested public.

Administrators and researchers who are interested in applying to the Office of Digital Humanities should definitely check out the projects we have already funded. (They are all easy to find on our website; check out our Library of Funded Projects at http://www.neh.gov/ODH.) It is also important to understand how to work collaboratively. So many of today's digital projects involve teams of people from various disciplines. Each member of the team brings different strengths to the project. We often see humanities scholars teaming up with computer scientists, librarians,

social scientists, and others. And the projects are richer for it. If you are developing a tool or methodology, we're very interested in broad applicability. Does this method just help your scholarship? Or can others benefit as well? Make sure you perform an environmental scan to find out what similar projects may already be under way. Also, check out Meredith Hindley's nice article on how to prepare your NEH application.

Lastly, I suggest getting out there and communicating. Use new media tools like blogs, wikis, and social networks. Go to conferences when you can. Talk to people in your field and other fields to find out what is possible and what needs to be done.

NOTE

This interview was originally published as Smith, Kathleen, and Michael Gavin. "Q&A with Brett Bobley, Director of the NEH's Office of Digital Humanities (ODH)," *HASTAC,* February 1, 2009. http://hastac.org/node/1934. Opinions expressed are those of Brett Bobley and do not necessarily reflect official positions of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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