Debates in the Digital Humanities

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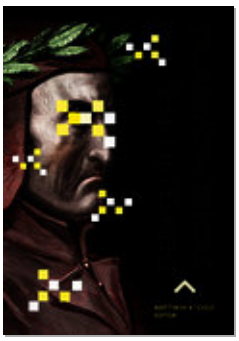

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Digital Humanities As/Is a Tactical Term

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—Top ten Google Instant appendages to a search on "digital humanities" as of April 28, 2011, 10:35 AM EDT

This Strange Confluence

Digital humanities is a tactical term.

In a previous essay, "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" I suggested that for those seeking to define digital humanities, the then-current Wikipedia definition (and top Google hit) served about as well as any and could save a lot of headache and, second, that the term "digital humanities" itself has a specific, recoverable history, originating with circumstances (which I documented) having primarily to do with marketing and uptake, and, third, that the term is now being "wielded instrumentally" by those seeking to effect change "amid the increasingly monstrous institutional terrain" of the contemporary academy. All these arguments suggest that the term is indeed tactical, by which I mean that attempts to arrive at models, mappings, and definitions—with concomitant implications for who's in and who's out, what is and what isn't, and appropriate ratios of "hack" to "yack"—are often self-defeating, not only because they are sometimes divisive, but also because they risk effacing the material history of the term as it has evolved within individual institutions over roughly the last decade.

To assert that digital humanities is a "tactical" coinage is not simply to indulge in neopragmatic relativism. Rather, it is to insist on the reality of circumstances in which it is unabashedly deployed to get things done—"things" that might include getting a faculty line or funding a staff position, establishing a curriculum, revamping a lab, or launching a center. At a moment when the academy in general and the humanities in particular are the objects of massive and wrenching changes, digital humanities emerges as a rare vector for jujitsu, simultaneously serving to

position the humanities at the very forefront of certain value-laden agendas—entrepreneurship, openness and public engagement, future-oriented thinking, collaboration, interdisciplinarity, big data, industry tie-ins, and distance or distributed education—while at the same time allowing for various forms of intrainstitutional mobility as new courses are approved, new colleagues are hired, new resources are allotted, and old resources are reallocated.

None of this, I should make clear at the outset, is to suggest any cynicism with regard to the intellectual integrity of the many projects and initiatives that proceed under the banner of the digital humanities: on the contrary, the availability of a billion-word corpus from the HathiTrust or digital images of a medieval manuscript captured in multispectral bands is just as "real" as the institutional considerations I've mentioned, and the desire to do work with these remarkable materials is genuine. How could it not be? As "The Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0" also insists,

> The phrase [digital humanities] has use-value to the degree that it can serve as an umbrella under which to group both people and projects seeking to reshape and reinvigorate contemporary arts and humanities practices, and expand their boundaries. It has use value to the degree one underscores its semantic edges: the edge where digital remains contaminated by dirty fingers, which is to say by notions of tactility and making that bridge the (non-)gap between the physical and the virtual; the edge where humanities suggests a multiplication of the human or humanity itself as a value that can (re)shape the very development and use of digital tools.

At the same time, however, I believe that those who insist that "digital" humanities is but a transitory term that will soon fall away in favor of just the humanities once again, or perhaps humanities 2.0, are mistaken. Once a course is on the books as "Introduction to Digital Humanities," it is there for the long haul. Once a center is named, names are hard to change—who wants to have to redo the letterhead and the stenciling on the wall?

The institutional structures we create thus tend to have long half-lives. An academic infrastructure that includes a journal named *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, a governing body named the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, a federal agency with an Office of Digital Humanities, and a major annual educational effort named the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (to take just a few examples) are not easily shifted. Behind these labels lie some very deep investments—of reputation, process, and labor, as well as actual capital. The paperwork, branding, and identity construction are only part of what makes digital humanities tactical, however; the other distinctive component at our current moment is the role of the network, in particular social media, and Twitter most particularly of all. While it may seem odd or tendentious to rapidly whittle down to the range of digital tools and platforms to one particular technology (and privately held corporate entity), the fact is that Twitter more than any other technology or platform is—at the very moment

when digital humanities is achieving its institutional apotheosis—the backchannel and professional grapevine for hundreds of people who self-identify as digital humanists. They use it daily to share information, establish contacts, ask and answer questions, bullshit, banter, rant, vent, kid, and carry on. The significance, however, is not just in people using Twitter to tweet at like-minded others but also in the algorithmic and ecological ways that the network effects of the online digital humanities "community" are reified and refracted through a range of different aggregators, reputation generators, metrical indicators, and status markers to present a visible and reified topology for the digital humanities as a whole. The obvious fact that not every digital humanist is actually on Twitter is thus beside the point for purposes of this argument. Rather, the deployment of the specific character string as a hashtag exposes it to algorithmic eyes that formally map and define what the digital humanities are or is at any given moment.

On the one hand, then, digital humanities is a term possessed of enough currency and escape velocity to penetrate layers of administrative strata to get funds allocated, initiatives under way, and plans set in motion. On the other hand, it is a populist term, self-identified and self-perpetuating through the algorithmic structures of contemporary social media. In what follows I will explore an example of each and then offer some concluding comments about the implications of this strange confluence.

And the Name

Timing, as they say, is everything. In the fall of 1999, my first semester away from the University of Virginia where I had spent the last seven years on my PhD (I had just left for a tenure-track job at the University of Kentucky), the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities convened a seminar titled "Is Humanities Computing an Academic Discipline?" The noncredit seminar was directed by Bethany Nowviskie (then a graduate student) and John Unsworth and consisted of a series of weekly conversations, punctuated by visits from distinguished scholars who were invited to give public presentations on the topic.[1] Deliberately eclectic and interdisciplinary in range, the speakers included Espen Aarseth, Susan Hockey, Willard McCarty, Stuart Moulthrop, Geoffrey Rockwell, and several others. Text analysis and text encoding, hypertext fiction, and computational linguistics were all represented as potentially constitutive of humanities computing as an academic discipline. There was at least one overt motivation to the proceedings: "Participants in this fall's seminar," read a press release, "will discuss the nature of humanities computing (Is it, in fact, a field of scholarly inquiry?) and whether the University should offer a degree program in it."[2]

Unsurprisingly as these things go, the conclusion reached by the seminar was that a degree program *should* be offered, and two academic years later in 2001–2, a second seminar, this time with funding from the National Endowment for the

Humanities, was convened.[3] Titled "Digital Humanities Curriculum Seminar," it was codirected by Unsworth and Johanna Drucker (who had also arrived at the university just as I was departing). Not only does the lack of an interrogative in the title furnish an up-front answer to the question posed by the earlier seminar, the lexical shift to digital humanities already seems a fait accompli. The agenda was also conspicuously more focused, with some two dozen faculty and graduate students participating as well as (again) a set of visiting speakers and consultants (myself among them). The key deliverable was a finished syllabus for a newly designed two-semester course in "Knowledge Representation," which would form the backbone of the graduate curriculum. Also by 2001, as indicated by a May 25 address to the Congress of Social Sciences and Humanities, Université Laval, Québec, Unsworth had in hand a draft proposal for a master's degree in digital humanities to be housed within the newly established program in media studies at Virginia.[4]

For a variety of reasons, this ambitious and prescient proposal for a master's in digital humanities at one of the flagship American institutions for work in the field was never realized. The proposal eventually died somewhere in the University of Virginia's administrative ether (how and why it is not my story to tell). But a closer analysis of some of the key documents from this period of institutional self-reflection, 1999 through 2002, helps illuminate what I mean by the "tactical" nature of digital humanities.

A number of items and records associated with both Virginia seminars remain publicly available on the web, and these are instructive (as well as often all too familiar in terms of the kind of questions and "debates"—to echo the present volume's title—engaged). This much is clear: by the end of the first semester, the instinct of the group was for keeping "humanities computing" at arm's length. Indeed, reading the December 10, 1999, minutes, we find a direct rewrite of the governing question of the seminar: "Should we have an M.A. in Digital Media?" the document (whose electronic file is titled "conclusions.html") begins by asking.[5] "Digital" thus replaces "computing," and "media" has muscled in on "humanities." Looking further back in the online archive to the first meeting for which there are recorded minutes (September 24, 1999), we find, immediately after mention of the assigned readings for that week—they are Espen Aarseth's "Humanistic Informatics and its Relation to the Humanities" and Willard McCarty's "What Is Humanities Computing"—the following notation: "Opposing models: humanities computing as theoretical discipline and as a practice based on collegial service."[6] Theory and "discipline" are thus opposed to "service" from the outset. Other oppositions follow: "philology" (McCarty) and "hypermedia" (Aarseth), humanities computing as discipline (McCarty) versus media studies (Aarseth). The institutional landscape is thus defined as one of media studies versus humanities computing, with McCarty (especially) laboring mightily to recapitulate the latter as a scholarly (and theoretical) undertaking, as distinct from service-oriented academic computing.

By the time we get to December 1999, however, only a few months later, the question seems to have been decided, at least within the seminar. Concerns over legitimization, status, and intrainstitutional relationships predominate. "Clear statement of central research questions will go a long way toward legitimizing a Digital Media program and separating it from the 'collegial service' model pervasive in Humanities Computing" (http://www.iath.virginia.edu/hcs/conclusions.html), the minutes of the concluding session record. While still, to some extent, using "humanities computing" and "digital media" interchangeably, at this point the record of the discussion also introduces a third term, "knowledge representation." Originating in the work of John Sowa (who would be an invited guest in the follow-on seminar), it is presented as the constitutive element of a humanities computing (or digital media) research agenda: "The general consensus of the seminar is that this problem should be articulated in terms of 'knowledge representation'—that we are now confronted with new ways of understanding, creating, and teaching information. The structures of and modes of representing that information should be an object of study" (http://www.iath.virginia.edu/hcs/conclusions.html).

A tactically aware reading of the foregoing would note that tension had clearly centered on the gerund "computing" and its service connotations (and we might note that a verb functioning as a noun occupies a service posture even as a part of speech). "Media," as a proper noun, enters the deliberations of the group already backed by the disciplinary machinery of "media studies" (also the name of the then new program at Virginia in which the curriculum would eventually be housed) and thus seems to offer a safer landing place. In addition, there is the implicit shift in emphasis from computing as numeric calculation to media and the representational spaces they inhabit—a move also compatible with the introduction of "knowledge representation" into the terms under discussion.[7]

How we then get from "digital media" to "digital humanities" is an open question. There is no discussion of the lexical shift in the materials available online for the 2001–2 seminar, which is simply titled, ex cathedra, "Digital Humanities Curriculum Seminar." The key substitution—"humanities" for "media"—seems straightforward enough, on the one hand serving to topically define the scope of the endeavor while also producing a novel construction to rescue it from the flats of the generic phrase "digital media." And it preserves, by chiasmus, one half of the former appellation, though "humanities" is now simply a noun modified by an adjective. In retrospect, then, the real work of the first seminar concerned the move from humanities computing to digital media, with the subsequent displacement of "media" by "humanities" most likely an ancillary maneuver and in any case not something that the conveners of the second seminar saw fit to comment on overtly at the time.

At this point, some chronological housekeeping is in order. Readers will recall that in my earlier essay on "What Is Digital Humanities?" I traced the putative origin of the term back to the decision to use it as the title for the Blackwell's Companion

volume, as recounted in an e-mail to me from John Unsworth, who describes a November 2001 editorial meeting with the publisher's marketing representative. It is clear, however, that the term was already in circulation among the curriculum group at Virginia and that this was the backdrop for Unsworth's advocacy of it in other contexts. A third key component was the founding of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations shortly thereafter, where Unsworth again played a central role with digital humanities emerging as the term of choice for this new governance body—also detailed in my earlier essay. The editors' introduction to the Blackwell volume, meanwhile, offers some oblique commentary on the matter: titled "The Digital Humanities and Humanities Computing," it seems to grant the two terms equal billing, but in fact digital humanities emerges as the wider ranging locution, with humanities computing solidified but circumscribed as its "interdisciplinary core" (Schreibman, Siemens, Unsworth, xxiv). Nonetheless, digital humanities, which would surely have been a novel construction for many readers when the volume first came into their hands in 2004, is never explicitly glossed, merely presented as the de facto name of what the editors declare in their opening sentence to be a "field" (xxiii). Patrik Svensson has done some useful quantitative work that helps fill in the rest of this picture, tracking, for example, the appearance of "humanities computing" as opposed to "digital humanities" on the influential Humanist listserv. He notes only a few scattered instances of the latter term prior to 2001, all of them casual nominal constructions such as "digital humanities object" or "environment"; afterwards, "digital humanities" rapidly gains traction until 2006–7 when the usage ratio roughly balances.

There is one more feature of the aborted Virginia master's proposal to which I will briefly call attention. This concerns the question of whether the degree should be a stand-alone offering or whether it should exist as a "track" within an existing departmental master's program. The December 1999 minutes put the question this way: "There was some discussion about staying 'above' or 'below' the SCHEV approval threshold. One option would be to start with a program within an existing department and work [to] attract students and faculty. When the program is a working success, then we could move to create a separate department. However, the seminar group seemed decided that the need for new faculty, facilities, and research agendas precludes starting small. Now seems to be the time to campaign aggressively for a large-scale Digital Media program." SCHEV is the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, and what's at stake here is the nature of the approval process that would be required for the new master's. To establish the degree as an independent program would eventually require the blessing of this statewide body; to establish it within the contours of an existing departmental program would sidestep that necessity. It is clear that there was a mood of confidence in the seminar, a feeling that the moment was right for a big push, one with consequences not only for the degree as such but also at the level of personnel and facilities like classrooms and labs. Crucially, such a move would be advanced under the banner of digital media

(or, as it later turned out, digital humanities) and *not* humanities computing. While the minutes can only record so much, it would seem incontrovertible that there was a calculus of sorts that the newer two terms would prove more efficacious, less fraught (avoiding, for example, any hint of competition with computer science), more compatible with the institution's sense of itself and collective purpose ("digital media" doubtless seemed like a good fit for a school that had just invested heavily in media studies), and generally broader in its appeal and potential for rapid uptake. These are tactical considerations. While the degree program never materialized (it certainly never made it to SCHEV), the discussions generated by the process have proven influential. And the name stuck.

And Virtual Alike

Digital humanities is a mobile and tactical signifier, whether from the standpoint of universities, publishers, scholarly organizations, funders, the press, or its actual practitioners. But in a Web 2.0 world of tweets, streams, and feeds, it is also more than a signifier, mobile or otherwise. Signifiers become keywords and tags, and these are the means by which distributed communities self-organize across the social and semantic contours of the contemporary Internet. First Google and now Twitter (these two services especially, I think) have, in essence, reified the digital humanities as a network topology, that is to say lines drawn by aggregates of elective affinities that are formally and tangibly manifest in who follows who, who friends who, who retweets who, and who links to what. Digital humanities (and its universal truncation DH), in other words, are *identifiers* routinely operationalized through various network services.

Twitter is not, of course, the first social and scholarly communications environment to serve the digital humanities. The aforementioned Humanist listserv, launched in 1987 (so early in the Internet's history that there was no perceived need for further discrimination of its target audience), was followed by hundreds of additional mailing lists throughout the nineties (the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities alone maintained dozens on its jefferson.village server, as did Michigan State University through the H-Net umbrella, the archives of which are now the subject of an organized digital preservation effort).[8] Instant chat, from Internet Relay Chat through commercial services like AIM and Google, has also been widely used by digital humanities. But the next major communications outlet was undoubtedly blogs, which began appearing in the humanities computing (or digital humanities) community predictably early in their general cultural onset (certainly by 2003 one could construct a robust digital humanities blogroll, and the comments fields on blog posts served as important venues for discussion). None of these new technologies, I would hasten to add, supplanted or replaced prior channels of public communication; rather, they coexisted with them, thickening the collective network ecology with each new addition. So, despite Twitter and the bevy of

other social networking services at our disposal, Humanist still publishes its listserv digests every two or three days, and many digital humanists remain active bloggers. Indeed, the increasingly porous boundaries between blogs and Twitter (in particular) are one of the salient features of the contemporary network environment, with platforms like WordPress capable of harvesting tweets referring to a given entry and accreting them alongside of comments posted to the blog site. This dynamic allows for strikingly robust real-time conversations to unfold, as has been demonstrated (for example) in the wake of both the 2009 and the 2011 Modern Language Association (MLA) conventions, when the heavy Twitter presence from the digital humanities entourage in turn provoked longer, more substantive blog postings engaging the issues emerging from the ballrooms of the Hiltons and Marriotts.

Just as Googling digital humanities to yield the Wikipedia definition is one surefire way of defining the field—not only for the particulars of the definition but also because its continuous shaping and policing by the community lends it a kind of tactical authenticity—so, too, does Twitter allow one to quickly limn the contours of an up-to-the-minute moving image of the digital humanities. I know of no better example of this than *Digital Humanities Now*, "a real-time, crowdsourced publication" that "takes the pulse of the digital humanities community and tries to discern what articles, blogs, projects, tools, collections, and announcements are worthy of greater attention."[9] "It is created," the site goes on to explain, "by ingesting the Twitter feeds of hundreds of scholars . . . processing these feeds through Twittertim.es to generate a more narrow feed of common interest and debate, and reformatting that feed on this site, in part to allow for further (non-Twitter) discussions." The tweets the service scans are those of several hundred self-identified DHers on a Twitter list maintained by the site's originator Dan Cohen, itself generally considered the most comprehensive listing of its kind. (It's important to emphasize that Dan will add anyone who asks if they are not on his radar screen already.) Collectively, these individuals are referred to as the site's "editorial board." *Digital Humanities Now*, or *dhnow*, thus combines the conceit of a scholarly journal with the real-time automated aggregation enabled by Twitter's open Application Programming Interface.

In practice, the site works only middling well, with many overtly non-DH topics getting promoted to the status of a "refereed" entry on the *dhnow* feed simply by virtue of their popularity among the demographic who happens to identify with DH. But while Cohen and the others behind the service clearly understand that it is an often arbitrary snapshot of the conversations and currents within the digital humanities community at any given moment, it nonetheless masquerades, through both its title and its publication strategy, as an impartial reflector *of* digital humanities in a larger professional sense. This *is* what's happening now, it purports to say, and *dhnow* thus reinforces the conceit of digital humanities as a stable, self-consistent signifier; as Cohen writes, "I often say to non-digital humanists that every Friday at five I know all of the most important books, articles, projects, and news of the week—without the benefit of a journal, a newsletter, or indeed any kind

of formal publication by a scholarly society. I pick up this knowledge by osmosis from the people I follow online."[10] Digital humanities thus emerges as "tactical" in the sense that it is also *procedural* in such an instance, operationalized through the automated functions of a site that harvests a self-selecting group of users who voluntarily affiliate and align themselves within the scope of coverage.

While an aggregated publication like *Digital Humanities Now* is ferociously democratic—"one retweet one vote," we might say—it would be disingenuous to pretend that digital humanities online doesn't also participate in certain celebrity economies and reputation metrics.[11] For example, Twitter's "Who to Follow" feature functions as a sort of phonebook for the service, allowing users to search for user accounts based on topic relevance. The first dozen or so hits on a search for "digital humanities," undertaken in early May 2011, revealed the following users:

- @dancohen (Dan Cohen): Director, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History & New Media, resources & platforms (Zotero, Omeka) for history & beyond, Mason prof of history & digital humanities
- @digitalhumanist (Dave Lester): Assistant Director at MITH (@umd_mith), digital humanities, open source, #DHapi, #thatcamp
- @dhnow (DigitalHumanitiesNow): What people in the digital humanities are reading and discussing, by @dancohen and the poeple @dhnow follows.
- @brettbobley (Brett Bobley): I like music, cooking, lasers, helicopters, computers, and I director the Office of Digital Humanities at the NEH.
- @nowviskie (Bethany Nowviskie): Director, Digital Research and Scholarship; UVA Library, Assoc. Director, Scholarly Communication Institute; VP, Assoc Computers & Humanities
- @JenServenti (Jennifer Serventi): Civil servant and friend of the digital humanities, food trucks, chocolate, ice cream, and cheese.
- @melissaterras (melissa terras): Reader, Dept of Information Studies, University College London. Digital Humanities, Digital Culture: Computing Science vs. cultural heritage
- @mkirschenbaum (Matthew Kirschenbaum): Assoc. Prof. English, Assoc. Director, MITH and Director, Digital Cultures and Creativity Living/Learning Program
- @amandafrench (Amanda French): PhD in English lit, singer-songwriter, tech fan
- @foundhistory (Tom Scheinfeldt): Managing Director of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason Univ (http://chnm.gmu.edu); chief Omekan (http://omeka.org); public historian

My concern here is not the accuracy or integrity of the "Who to Follow" algorithm—the users listed here would all be excellent people to follow as thought leaders in the digital humanities, and the list accords with my own off-the-cuff

choices (though we might note the somehow recursive presence of *dhnow*)—but rather that a user may not realize that this particular mapping of digital humanities is itself tactical, a product of an inexorable calculus of influence and reputation that continually sorts, ranks, and situates, plucking patterns and trends from the data stream, orienting them around accounts and avatars to generate a set of cohesive user identities, and collectively packaging the lot as a fast, honest answer to the simple question, who should I follow? which is really another way of asking, who's important? who matters? And not only who should I *follow*, but whose eyeballs do *I* want on *me*? Indeed, the very fact that everyone on Twitter is subjectified as a "who"—even institutions and services take on that singular pronoun—speaks to the odd flattening of agency that characterizes this multivalent social topology. While there is no public documentation available on how the "Who to Follow" feature actually works, it seems safe to assume that the algorithm harvests profile data, the content of tweets, hashtags, and most of all who follows who and who their followers follow in order to arrive at its influence mappings around any given topic. Of course, the end result is obvious: the mappings are self-perpetuating, so that those who are currently identified as influential users in a given topic space will accumulate even more followers as a result of their visibility through the "Who to Follow" feature, which will in turn contribute to reinforcing their ranking by the algorithm.

Some observers will, of course, suggest that such stuff has been a feature of scholarly life since at least the days of the Royal Academy (or maybe Plato's academy). But a better and more specific frame of reference might be the "star system" in literary studies. (The contentious suggestion of a "star system" in digital humanities was memorably lofted in a blog piece by William Pannapacker covering DH sessions at the 2011 MLA conference in Los Angeles, which is reprinted here.[12]) The scholar most closely identified with a diagnosis and critical analysis of the workings of the academic star system is David R. Shumway, who in 1997 wrote a much-talked-about piece in *PMLA* on the phenomenon. Shumway, of course, is himself adopting the phrase from Hollywood, recounting the genealogy of "stardom" as a new and distinct form of celebrity manufactured by the studios. Shumway makes several trenchant points, yoking the emergence of stars in literary studies not only to the rise of high theory but also to the rise of the international academic conference, the airlines that transport us to them, the ongoing institutionalization of academic literary studies as a research discipline (and the attendant search for legitimization), and the proliferation of images of the professoriate amid the ferment of the culture wars. Ultimately, he concludes that the star system in literary studies is a distinct historical phenomenon that originates in the late 1970s; he also concludes that the disproportionate resources required to maintain it likely contribute to the unhealthy rise of contingent labor and the general deterioration of academic working conditions. Moreover, he sees it as serving to undermine the public's confidence in the academy by diluting the authority of the rank-and-file professoriate.

Several of Shumway's characterizations of the star system map all too easily onto digital humanities. The management of public image, for example: we do this both trivially in the form of avatars as well as more substantively through our daily online "presences" on blogs, Twitter, listservs, and more. Likewise, it's worth noting that, like "high theory," the digital humanities is routinely positioned as a kind of metadiscourse (or methodology) that cuts across individual subdisciplines and fields. This is an enormously powerful and seductive base of operations. Most tellingly, for Shumway star quality is not simply a function of public image or the number of frequent flier miles the academic logs but rather of a specific kind of relationship between consumers, or "fans," and the celebrity: "It is the feeling of personal connection that transforms the merely famous scholar into a star" (92). In the digital humanities, I would argue, this special relationship is less a function of the performativity of a lecture (most of us are simply not that interesting to watch) than the ruthless metrics of online community, the *frisson* that comes from an @reply from someone more famous than you or *you'll never believe who just started following me!* For those of us who spend time online in Twitter and (to a lesser degree) other social networks, including Facebook and the looser tissues of the blogosphere, this star system is reified (and sometimes even quantified or visualized) in the ongoing accumulation of network relations that describe—often all too precisely—influence and impact, pitilessly allowing one to locate oneself in the ecosystem at any given instant. This seems to me to go some way toward explaining why there is so much anxiety around the Twitter/DH nexus (as reflected in other essays in this volume, for example)—its constant mappings and metrics have come to inhabit that intangible performative dimension that Shumway earlier ascribed to the public (and in-person) appearances of the high-theory stars.

Online relationships are eminently portable across the analog/digital membrane, so those who are in positions of visibility and impact online reap rewards that have more tangible consequences in meatspace. As Phil Agre reminded us a long time ago, the network is a terrific place to, well, network.[13] At its best, this can be a great multiplier, or democratizer: the individual with a 4/4 load at an isolated teaching institution can wield influence in ways that would have been unthinkable in the theory-driven era Shumway describes. That kind of load balancing—no longer Yale deconstruction or Duke English but centers of influence at big public land-grant institutions or small "teaching colleges"—is dramatically different from the star system characterized by daring publicity stills of Derrida or De Man (of the sort Shumway reproduced in his essay), or the faux-fanzine *Judy*. But it is not any less divorced from the real world balance of academic power, which still manifests in the form of jobs, grants, publications, invitations, and all the rest of the apparatus that Shumway's high-theory stars defined by transcending. As cycles of influence flicker ever more rapidly back and forth between the analog and digital worlds, as tenure committees in the humanities begin to import impact metrics (citation indices and the like) from the sciences, and as the success stories of the disempowered few who

rise above their rank through social networking become more commonplace, digital humanities must do better than simply brush off any suggestion of ins and outs on the networks that connect it day to day. It must acknowledge, openly and frankly, that while Twitter (and other online social networks) and DH are not coextensive, the interactions among and between them are real and consequential.

And yes, tactical. Networks, as Dianne Rocheleau and Robin Roth remind us, are "relational webs shot through with power," and "an individual's position within the network is not neutral or arbitrary, but has implications for how the individual views the network and how s/he/it may act within it (or against it)" (434). It's not just that our avatars are now the real stars—it's that stardom (or else simply surviving) is also now a function of one's ability to arbitrage influence across all manner of networks, "real" and virtual alike.

And Not an End

My own contribution of this essay to this volume at this time is itself ineluctably tactical, a positioning and an intervention. But it is not a provocation, or at least it is not intended to be. I have brought together some bits of obscure institutional history dredged from a decade ago and observations about the dynamics of reputation and community online at the present moment in order to make a simple point: not only is digital humanities constantly in flux, but also the term is one whose mojo may be harnessed, either rhetorically or algorithmically or both, to make a statement, make a change, and otherwise get stuff done. Lately other commentators have also wanted to insist that digital humanities is a tactical construct, but for them such insistence seems to serve more of a means of disarming the term from a stance of perceived disenfranchisement. If DH is merely tactical, this line of attack goes, it can be outflanked in favor of some alternative nomenclature that is more inclusive, more pluralistic, more democratic, and so forth. This in my view is precisely wrong since it is oblivious to the import of the institutional, material, and social contexts in which the term digital humanities has already been taken up and operationally embedded.[14]

While not particularly revelatory in and of itself, my "tactical" view of what digital humanities *really* is offers a necessary counterbalance, I believe, to some current tensions and debates within the wider community represented in this volume and beyond. Much energy is now being expended on defining what digital humanities is, on whether a paper or proposal was accepted or rejected because it was or was not "real" digital humanities, and so forth—as though appeals to higher authorities can transcend the reality that review panels and committees and boards are nearly always staffed by overworked and undercompensated individuals (who are by no means exclusively tenured or tenure-track faculty) doing what they can do to do

the best with what they have. But digital humanities has also been claimed, some might even say radicalized, as precisely that space where traditional academic and institutional practices are vulnerable to intervention, with individual scholars or self-organizing affinity groups utilizing the tools and channels of online communication to effect real institutional change. This often (arguably only) happens one policy statement, one proposal approval, one new ad-hoc committee, one new budget line item, one promotion, or one new job at a time. Successes can only sometimes be leveraged across institutions or, indeed, across departments and units within the same institution. The oppositional and activist connotations of my reliance on the word tactical here are thus not incidental and refer to the outsider status some in digital humanities increasingly wish to claim, as well as to related phenomena such as tactical media and hacktivism. Digital humanities is not only about such things, of course, but a lot of angst and anxiety at this moment could perhaps more productively be channeled elsewhere if we simply remind ourselves that DH is a means and not an end.[15]

NOTES

1. http://www.iath.virginia.edu/hcs/.
2. http://www.virginia.edu/topnews/releases/humanities-sept-16-1999.html.
3. http://www.iath.virginia.edu/hcs/dhcs/.
4. http://www3.isrl.illinois.edu/~unsworth/laval.html.
5. http://www.iath.virginia.edu/hcs/conclusions.html.
6. http://www.iath.virginia.edu/hcs/9–24.html.
7. In a note on a draft of this essay, Johanna Drucker comments as follows: "[I]t might be interesting to describe the curriculum we came up with because it was so dedicated to crossing the doing/describing divide that seems to be a persistent plague in DH discussions. Our 'spine' in that curriculum went from digitization, data types, database design, computer languages/programming, interface design, information visualization, text analysis/markup, intellectual property, communities of practice, diversity of communities, etc. through a series of units EACH of which had a set of theoretical readings AND a set of exercises created for it. Geoff Rockwell was in that seminar, along with a few other interesting visitors at UVA that year, and then the UVA folks—McGann, Pitti, Laue, Nowviskie, Ramsay, Unsworth, Martin, and others I'm forgetting and don't mean to slight. But the principle of making sure that theory and practice talked to each other was crucial. The adoption of the 'digital media' rubric was, as you note correctly, a tactical one within UVA's environment, meant to aim at a compromise in which critical/theoretical issues from media studies might feel legitimate as part of the practice."
8. http://www.h-net.org/archive/.
9. http://digitalhumanitiesnow.org/.

10. http://www.dancohen.org/2009/11/18/introducing-digital-humanities-now/. Reprinted in this volume.

11. Portions of the paragraphs that follow were originally published as a blog post, "The (DH) Stars Come Out in LA" (http://mkirschenbaum.wordpress.com/2011/01/13/the-dh-stars-come-out-in-la-2/).

12. http://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/pannapacker-at-mla-digital-humanities-triumphant/30915.

13. http://vlsicad.ucsd.edu/Research/Advice/network.html.

14. See, for example, this exchange between Alex Reid and myself: http://www.alex-reid.net/2011/06/digital-humanities-tactics.html.

15. For comments that helped me clarify my thinking I am grateful to Luke Waltzer, Neil Fraistat, Johanna Drucker, Jentery Sayers, Liz Losh, and Matt Gold.

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