Debates in the Digital Humanities

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Day of DH:
Defining the Digital Humanities

A Day in the Life of the Digital Humanities (*Day of DH*) is a community publication project sponsored by the University of Alberta under the direction of Geoffrey Rockwell. Each year, it brings together digital humanists from around the world to document what they do on one day, March 18. The goal of the project is to create a website that weaves together the journals of the participants into a picture that answers the question, Just what do computing humanists really do? Participants document their day through photographs and commentary in a blog-like journal. The collection of these journals with links, tags, and comments makes up the final work that is published online.

In advance of the *Day of DH*, participants are asked, How do you define humanities computing / digital humanities? The following selection of definitions was culled from 2011 answers to that question, which are posted publicly on the *Day of DH* website.[1]

Using computational tools to do the work of the humanities.
—*John Unsworth, University of Illinois, United States*

I think of digital humanities as an umbrella term that covers a wide variety of digital work in the humanities: development of multimedia pedagogies and scholarship, designing and building tools, human computer interaction, designing and building archives, and so on. DH is interdisciplinary; by necessity it breaks down boundaries between disciplines at the local (e.g., English and history) and global (e.g., humanities and computer sciences) levels.
—*Kathie Gossett, Old Dominion University, United States*

A "community of practice" (to borrow Etienne Wenger's phrase) whereby the learning, construction, and sharing of humanities knowledge is under-

taken with the application of digital technologies in a reflexive, theoretically informed, and collaborative manner.

—*Kathryn E. Piquette, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany*

A name that marks a moment of transition; the current name for humanities inquiry driven by or dependent on computers or digitally born objects of study; a temporary epithet for what will eventually be called merely Humanities.

—*Mark Marino, University of Southern California, United States*

I view the digital humanities as a collaborative, open, and emerging field of inquiry. A state of mind, a methodology, and theoretical approach to knowledge, it forces us to reconceive our practice. In my own work, I embrace curation as a means of reweaving and reintegrating theory and practice in history. I seek to interpret space, place, and identity in a multisensory way. I fail more often than not. But the digital humanities is like jazz in that it is about process, as well as outcome.

—*Mark Tebeau, Cleveland State University, United States*

I think digital humanities, like social media, is an idea that will increasingly become invisible as new methods and platforms move from being widely used to being ubiquitous. For now, digital humanities defines the overlap between humanities research and digital tools. But the humanities are the study of cultural life, and our cultural life will soon be inextricably bound up with digital media.

—*Ed Finn, Stanford University, United States*

A term of tactical convenience.

—*Matthew Kirschenbaum, University of Maryland, United States*

It is both a methodology and a community.

—*Jason Farman, University of Maryland, United States*

When I'm asked, I like to say that digital humanities is just one method for doing humanistic inquiry.

—*Brian Croxall, Emory University, United States*

The Digital Humanities is both a field with a discernable set of academic lineages, practices, and methodologies and a vague umbrella term used to describe the application of digital technology to traditional humanistic

inquiry. Ultimately, what sets DH apart from many other humanities fields is its methodological commitment to building things as a way of knowing.
—*Matthew K. Gold, New York City College of Technology and CUNY Graduate Center, United States*

Digital Humanities is the integration of sophisticated, empirical techniques utilizing tools and technologies typically associated with practical sciences into the study of traditional humanities questions. It represents a more exploratory and less quantitative approach than social sciences in the use of such tools, but it also represents ambitious attempts to model nuanced human wisdom in ways that, like early flying machines, are beautiful, quite impractical and often fail.
—*Elijah Meeks, Stanford University, United States*

The use of digital tools and methods in humanities study and dissemination.
—*Geoffrey Rockwell, University of Alberta, Canada*

DH is inquiry enabled by digital methodologies or modes of research, dissemination, design, preservation, and communication that rely on algorithms, software, and/or the Internet network for processing data.
—*Tanya Clement, University of Maryland, United States*

The scholarly study and use of computers and computer culture to illuminate the human record. (BUSA Remix)
—*Ernesto Priego, University College London, United Kingdom*

Digital Humanities is a critical investigation and practice of the methods of humanities research in the digital medium.
—*Julia Flanders, Brown University, United States*

Digital humanities is a metafield, a set of coevolving new knowledge and best practices expanding from traditional humanities disciplines into born-digital research and teaching methods. Digital humanists study all objects and practices of concern to analog humanities, plus those made possible by the digital age. Digital humanists also build tools that make it possible for themselves, their students, and the world at large to engage critically with our cultural heritage.
—*Vika Zafrin, Boston University, United States*

I don't: I'm sick of trying to define it. When forced to, I'll make the referent the people instead of the ideas or methods—Digital Humanities is the

thing practiced by people who self-identify as Digital Humanists. It's help-ful to have a name for the field chiefly for institutional authority. Though granted I think it does involve coding/making/building/doing things with computers, things related to, you know, the humanities.

—Amanda French, Center for History and New Media, United States

Digital Humanities is a way to ask, redefine, and answer questions with a more intelligent set of tools.

—Lik Hang Tsui, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

I think it's a convenient label, but fundamentally I don't believe in it. There are people who haven't yet attempted to come to grips with how digi-tal tools and methods can change research, teaching, and outreach in the Humanities, and those who have. The latter are Digital Humanities types. But it's all Wissenschaft.

—Hugh Cayless, New York University, United States

The digital humanities is what digital humanists do. What digital human-ists do depends largely on academic discipline but also on level of technical expertise. Each discipline, with varying degrees of intensity, has over the years developed a set of favored methods, tools, and interests that, although shared with other disciplines, remains connected to the discipline. The task of the digital humanities, as a transcurricular practice, is to bring these practitioners into communication with each other and to cultivate a dis-course that captures the shared praxis of bringing technologies of repre-sentation, computation, and communication to bear on the work of inter-pretation that defines the humanities.

—Rafael Alvarado, University of Virginia, United States

I think digital humanities is an unfortunate neologism, largely because the humanities itself is a problematic term. The biggest problem is that the tent isn't big enough! I have participated in a number of DH events and they are strikingly similar to things like Science Online.

With that said, DH is at its best when it embraces the digital not simply as a means to the traditional ends of scholarship, but when it transforms the nature of what humanists do. The digital allows for scholars, librarians, archivists, and curators to engage much more directly with each other and the public. Further, it allows them not simply to write for each other, but to build things for everyone.

—Trevor Owens, Library of Congress, United States

NOTE

1. For the full range of 2011 definitions see http://tapor.ualberta.ca/taporwiki/index
.php/How_do_you_define_Humanities_Computing_/_Digital_Humanities%3F. The Day
of DH homepage can be found at http://tapor.ualberta.ca/taporwiki/index.php/Day_of
_Digital_Humanities.

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