Debates in the Digital Humanities

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Why Digital Humanities Is "Nice"

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One of the things that people often notice when they enter the field of digital humanities is how nice everybody is. This can be in stark contrast to other (unnamed) disciplines where suspicion, envy, and territoriality sometimes seem to rule. By contrast, our most commonly used bywords are "collegiality," "openness," and "collaboration." We welcome new practitioners easily, and we don't seem to get in lots of fights. We're the golden retrievers of the academy. (OK, it's not always all balloons and cotton candy, but most practitioners will agree that the tone and tenor of digital humanities is conspicuously amiable when compared to many, if not most, academic communities.)

There are several reasons for this. Certainly the fact that nearly all digital humanities is collaborative accounts for much of its congeniality—you have to get along to get anything accomplished. The fact that digital humanities is still young, small, vulnerable, and requiring of solidarity also counts for something.

But I have another theory: Digital humanities is nice because, as I have described in earlier posts, we're often more concerned with method than we are with theory. Why should a focus on method make us nice? Because methodological debates are often more easily resolved than theoretical ones. Critics approaching an issue with sharply opposed theories may argue endlessly over evidence and interpretation. Practitioners facing a methodological problem may likewise argue over which tool or method to use. Yet at some point in most methodological debates one of two things happens: either one method or another wins out empirically, or the practical needs of our projects require us simply to pick one and move on. Moreover, as Sean Takats, my colleague at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (CHNM), pointed out to me today, the methodological focus makes it easy for us to "call bullshit." If anyone takes an argument too far afield, the community of practitioners can always put the argument to rest by asking to see some working code, a useable standard, or some other tangible result.

In each case, the focus on method means that arguments are short, and digital humanities stays nice.

NOTE

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