What is Digital Humanities?

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What Is DH?

Digital Humanities?

When starting off, I had no idea what Digital humanities entailed. I knew there would some working with computers, but didn't realize how much computer work would be needed. I am far from a computer literate person, so, this is quite the struggle for me. When finding out just how many programs I needed for this class, I was confused as to why. I still didn't quite understand what Digital Humanities is.

Discovering DH

Upon reading required texts, I finally had a definition for Digital Humanities. In an article by Kirschenbaum, *What Is Digital Humanities and What is it Doing in English Departments*, this is the definition that was given:

> "The digital humanities, also known as humanities computing, is a field of study, research, teaching, and invention concerned with the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities." (Kirschenbaum 2)

What Does That Mean?

For starters, you know that there is the word 'computing' in the definition, meaning there is involvement of computers and electronics. So, if you take the rest of the definition, I believe that would mean that in Digital Humanities you'll be researching and analyzing in electronic form. However, with the few weeks that I've had in class it seems to be more than that. There is a lot of technological things going on in Digital Humanities. We've learned how to use different programs in order to make documents and a different way of writing.

Meaning Microsoft Word has been taking out of this class and replaced by plan text docs that are written with specific characters that will translate into different things when converted into different documents. After reading the Kirschenbaum article, I still didn't quite understand what exactly DH was. I understand that it's complicated, and it involves technology and research, but I still didn't quite grasp it.

Coming to an Understanding

You would think that having a solid definition, and understanding that definition would then allow you to understand the topic under consideration, it didn't. It caused me more confusion. Until, I read another article by Mark Sample called, *The Digital Humanities is not About Building, It's About Sharing.* In the article Sample states, >"The heart of the digital humanities is not the production of knowledge; it's the *reproduction* of knowledge." (Sample) That quote solidified everything to me. Digital Humanities was about changing the way that knowledge is presented. It's changing the way that people think about presenting the knowledge that they've gathered. Three weeks ago I never would have thought I'd be writing in Markdown, making rtf files in pandoc, or trying to figure out how to compile an ebook.

Coming to an End

Digital Humanities is about using technology to research and teach and present things in an electronic form. It challenges the typical way of thinking when it comes to technologically presenting information. There is more than just Microsoft Word out there.

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When it comes to digital humanities everyone seems to draw their own conclusion as to what they think it is. Some deem it as progressivism, some view it as building, we go further to say community and sharing, but what is digital humanities really ? A wise man would inform you that describing digital humanities, or DH for short would be equivalent to explaining what water taste like. To begin I will discuss some of the views of Matthew G. Kirschenbaum who wonders how it has entered our English departments. This one serves as a more immediate realization of digital humanities given that I am an English major and had the choice to take this class an option, also, most of this class has consisted of a surplus of computer work, thus digital humanities. Kirschenbaum finds it necessary to refer to wikepedia for the definition and it states "The digital humanities, also known as humanities computing, is a field of study, research, teaching, and invention concerned with the intersection of computing and the

disciplines of the humanities". Now lets delve a little into what is meant by humanities computing; University of Chicago believes "humanities computing, is a field of study, research, teaching, and invention concerned with the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities"(Kirschenbaum), but also use digital humanities as a synonymic two.

Stephen Ramsey is a tenured professor of digital humanities and believes that it is necessary to know how to "code" in digital humanities. Bluntly Ramsey states, "Personally, I think Digital Humanities is about building things. [. . .] If you are not making anything, you are not. . . a digital humanist,"(Ramsay) which well conveys connotations of humanities computing, although he himself may not feel exactly the same. Coding can be described as "a form of writing with a dual audience: machines and other coders (including one's future self)", courtesy of digitalhumanitiesnow.org

Julia Flanders explains technology as "technological progressivism", and The narratives that surround technology tend, understandably, to be progressive." The fact that the power of computer chips keep getting better and faster over the years, as well as an increase in disk utility shows the advancements of technology, and this advancement and progression is what we can deem a digital humanity. "Digital humanities scholarship to a large degree shares this sense of progress"(Flanders), Flanders exclaims "We see, first of all, simple infrastructural developments that change the social location of computers and bring them into our sphere of activity."

In conclusion digital humanities is a hard topic to dissect concisely as one, but many things amongst the digital and human world collaboratively. In relation to "what is digital humanities", Kirschenbaum says "It's tempting to say that whoever asks the question has not gone looking very hard for an Answer," for one will realize the answer is in multiple perspectives among a similar parallel.

Defining the Digital Humanities

The digital humanities are a source of much discussion, controversy and confusion within humanities departments. While the tools and ideas present within the digital humanities are several decades old, they are receiving much more attention in recent years due to their increase in popularity and the rise of open source software and technology. It is difficult to get to the heart of what the digital humanities are and why there is such heated debate over their validity within academia. Many modern commentators offer answers to that question and the main point of contention seems to revolve around the availability and sharing of cultural information that had previously been kept in the few. Digital humanities are perceived as a threat to literary studies because they encourage sharing and free access to information and publishing.

One of the major arguments against the digital humanities involves the sanctity of printed works and their availability. In his article criticizing the digital humanities,

Stephen Marche asserts that the digitalization of texts and their wide distribution is akin to disbinding them, and that "Cutting open the book is literally a return to the forms and modes of paganism" (Marche). He also compares the spread of the humanities via technology to the invention of the printing press and the subsequent "early scribal resistance to print" (Marche), referring to the scribes that held the proverbial keys to the kingdom on literacy. This argument is common and underscores the core issue here; academics and scholars, previously gatekeepers to culture, are less necessary now that information is readily available.

But what about the digital humanities enables the spread of culture? It stems from the fact that it is now easier than ever to find, create and distribute literature and humanities works. Matthew Kirschenbaum sums this aspect of the subject up perfectly by describing the MLA convention in which attendees tweeted the happenings of the conference, thus providing a running commentary and updates in real time (Kirschenbaum). Mark Sample also analyzes the digital humanities and argues that they are about sharing and communication. Sample writes, "We should no longer be content to make our work public achingly slowly along ingrained routes, authors and readers alike delayed by innumerable gateways limiting knowledge production and sharing" (Sample). In addition to a new openness in a typically reserved profession, the rise of single source publishing has played a key role in the production and distribution of texts. Single source publishing is the creation of a single text using a specific text format that can then be transformed to multiple formats using that same original text. Lawyer Ian Sullivan describes in his article "Innovation in Practice" how his law office prepares Supreme Court briefs using single source publishing tools available for free online. This is a key example of professional publishing and document preparation can now be done for free and is accessible to everyone. The availability of such software and the ability to share texts so easily in many formats is an example of the digital humanities is a discipline of sharing and collaboration.

While there are several criticisms of the digital humanities that are valid, such as the debate over the true essence of the discipline, the most invective arguments against them seem reactionary and targeted at the new availability of information. Humanities are no longer confined to libraries or bookstores, but the internet. Digital scholarship and techniques allow even major law firms to produce their own custom texts and share them easily. This places sharing and the flow of information at the heart of the digital humanities and regardless of the power they take away from scholars and academics, it also empowers them to explore the humanities with new ease and efficiency.

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