The Ouroboros; or, How “Digital” and “Humanities” Will Shape Each Other in the Near Future

Before I can tackle the future of digital humanities, it’s important to note that there are varying beliefs regarding what the digital humanities actually are. This was never more apparent to me than when I recently attended THATCamp, a popular and well-respected digital humanities conference. Based on the sessions, dialogue, and Twitter stream, it was obvious that for the attendees, as for the field at large, the digital humanities are defined along a spectrum with two poles: those who focus their research on the ways in which digital tools change the human experience, and those who use digital tools to expand the scope and shape of their research into new questions and domains. Yet regardless of how we define our work, most of us think of ourselves as humanists first. Thus, to focus on the future of digital humanities is to look at how digital humanists integrate their work into a much larger humanities sphere.

The logical conclusion of the first approach to framing the digital humanities is that all humanist work is now mediated by the digital, which suggests that all humanists are now digital. This approach extends existing disciplinary boundaries into online space, emphasizing the broad digital distribution of rare source materials and specialized humanities research. This often includes a focus on collections and library science. The second approach suggests that digital tools create a new kind of humanist whose work and credentials don’t fit into traditional humanities departments, such as literature or history, because tools and techniques from computer science and telecommunications form the foundation of these new research methods. There are arguments for and against both approaches. Notably, critics suggest that the former perpetuates disciplinary silos and adds little new information to the conversation, whereas the latter also isn’t really that new, since techniques that are central to other disciplines (e.g., text mining, n-grams, statistical research) have been part of the humanities world for decades. However, scholars in both camps share some interests that will shape the future of digital humanities and that should likewise be of interest to humanists in general: public outreach, practical training, and scholarly diversity.

Outreach is probably the most important of these features, because public engagement takes advantage of the single largest structural difference between early computational humanities and 21st-century digital humanities: connectivity. For example, after Sarah Palin suggested that the colonial patriot Paul Revere warned the British that they weren’t going to be able to take away American arms, her devotees edited Wikipedia to back up her statement. Though it might pain us to see the value in such inaccurate historical recollection, the fluid nature of the source (Wikipedia) and the public debate between specialist and generalist presaged a key piece of the future of digital humanities.

The instant, constantly evolving nature of a two-way channel marks a structural and disciplinary difference between the narrowly accessible type of work that Roberto Busa did starting in the 1940s and the public outreach that digital humanists can and should do in the future.

This kind of debate also highlights the need for consumers of digital humanities to have a new set of skills, including a critical awareness of the fluidity of many online sources. It’s easy to assume that anyone born after 1995 has both digital literacy, or the ability to actively sift through digital information in a discerning way, and digital fluency, or the ability to communicate and create in digital media environments. Reality suggests otherwise. Familiarity with tools is often very different from critical engagement with the content those tools make available. In the classroom, digital humanists do engage students in the traditional interpretive exercises common to humanities disciplines. However, digital humanists also increasingly ask students to question the implications of the digital tools they use to distribute their findings and, if they find the tools lacking, to actively seek out and learn new tools. The key to the future of digital humanities in the classroom is for students to feel “uncomfortable.” Creating a feedback loop between critical consumption and practical production strengthens both digital literacy and digital fluency, but it also means digital humanists will find themselves utilizing tools they themselves may not entirely understand.

Finally, though it may seem obvious given the outreach and training facets of the digital humanities, another area of
concern is whether the digital humanities world includes a diverse range of scholars. That diversity fits along two axes: academic diversity and socioeconomic diversity. From the academic perspective, digital humanists emphasize the importance of breaking down barriers between “traditional” tenured faculty roles and nontraditional, alternate academic careers (known as #alt-ac). Limiting specialists to those who hold Ph.D.’s, employing researchers in traditional tenured professorships, and maintaining a paywall around academic publications hinder the outreach that digital humanists see as their first priority. Socioeconomic boundaries also limit the kinds of outreach that digital humanists—especially those at the college/university level—can do. Even though higher education enrollments are more diverse than ever, that diversity has its limits. Students often encounter these limits before they ever enter the classroom, and that too hinders the public-outreach goal.

The future of digital humanities, then, is about access to new peers, new scholars, new information, and new techniques. Regardless of whether we see all humanists as digital or see all digital humanists as members of a new discipline, the connectivity built into today’s digital world requires us to rethink not only what it means to be a humanist but also how being a humanist may change as a result of these new and emerging technologies.

Notes

Kalani Craig (kalani@kalanicraig.com) is a Ph.D. candidate in medieval history at Indiana University, where her primary research uses data mining and other digital humanities tools to examine the interaction of divine and human agency in bishops’ lives between 500 C.E. and 1000 C.E. (<http://www.kalanicraig.com>).

© 2011 Kalani Craig. The text of this article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>).