Digital Humanities, Digitizing Humanity

My perspective on the digital humanities and digital scholarship reflects both my ongoing scholarly interests and my administrative responsibilities as a relatively new president (having taken office at Lafayette College in July 2013). I have seen firsthand the exciting work that is being done in my own field (literature) and in other humanities disciplines, and I can thus envision the potential of these approaches to open up new areas of inquiry for scholars and to create opportunities for collaboration in fields that have generally required colleagues to work independently. At my own institution, a recent Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant for work in the digital humanities has brought together colleagues in literature, history, art, and Africana studies, as well as colleagues in our library’s digital scholarship services. At the same time, I recognize the challenges that digital work can present to the standard review and tenure processes, to peer conventions about what constitutes scholarship, and to institutional budgets that have not typically been required to accommodate technology demands from humanities disciplines.

Although much of the best commentary on the digital humanities has focused on the impact for individual scholars and disciplines, we should also think more broadly about how the digital humanities might reenergize public appreciation for the humanities in general. Nicholas Kristof recently created a stir among academics by writing that academia has abandoned the model of the public scholar and has allowed fields to become too specialized to speak to outsiders.1 Many counterexamples quickly appeared in the article comments section, on Twitter, and elsewhere. But few would dispute the idea that we could do more to generate public interest in the fields we hold dear. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) offers funding for public scholarship in a variety of digital media, and already the presence of digital historical archives and digital journals has opened up significant scholarly holdings to worldwide audiences that would never have had access to them in the past. The enormous popularity of book groups and MOOCs in recent years suggests that there is great interest in informal education. Many museums have begun creating self-guided educational opportunities around new digital projects, and we have only begun to think about how we can encourage and shape a public experience of these resources. At an even broader level, we should begin to think about how applying digital approaches to humanistic disciplines might contribute to the public’s ability to grapple with the urgent cultural task that is before us: learning how to make sense of an increasingly data-centric environment.

When we consider the question of why the term digital humanities has evolved as a distinct field when other disciplines don’t feel the need to designate digital work separately—as “digital social sciences,” for example—it seems clear that we perceive a greater tension between the conventions of humanistic inquiry and the nature of digital work. The humanities are, after all, grounded not only in the study of humanity but in a methodology that typically focuses on the encounter between one human mind, that of the writer or artist, and another human mind, that of the critic. Unlike the sciences, where research is authenticated by its replicability, the humanities privilege the unique, individual act of interpretation.

To pursue the digital humanities, then, is to remove oneself from the sphere of the individual and explore the ways in which meaning can be created through automated examination of data that could not be accessed or interpreted by a single human being. At some level, this requires us to abandon the notion that meaning can be generated only through the power of the individual mind. A different kind of meaning is exposed when technology uncovers patterns or information that would otherwise remain invisible. Coming to terms with that meaning requires a different way of thinking.

Similarly, in the world as a whole we are confronting dramatic changes in the nature of the information that we encounter on a daily basis. In all walks of life, numbers and data are taking on greater significance, from the ratings and rankings that accompany the simplest choices of hotels, restaurants, or even colleges to the demand for accountability metrics that drive decision-making in companies, organizations, and public life. We are not well equipped to interpret all of the data around us, and an increased emphasis on mathematics and statistics can only partially solve the problem.

What we are learning from the digital humanities, I believe, is that technology can help us to generate informa-
tion we might not otherwise see and that, in the end, the act of interpretation is a fully human endeavor. By experimenting with ways to use data to illuminate traditional humanistic concerns, scholars in this field are reminding us that there are two dimensions that define an inquiry: the content, and the methodology. The content may take the form of traditional objects of study such as a poem, a sculpture, or a historical text. What we do with it in terms of methodology may change radically in the coming years. But in the end, we will be trying to answer some of the same questions that scholars have asked for generations. In this way, the digital humanities provides a valuable paradigm for all of our efforts to understand the information that flows at us from every direction. The digital humanities reminds us that data is of little use unless it can be framed in the context of human experience.

Note

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