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Session, "Digital Humanities vs. New Media"

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Everything Old is New Again: The Digital Past and the Humanistic Future

The question posed by the topic of this panel, "Digital Humanities vs. New Media," is a question about the emergence and definition of new fields, and this framing both calls attention to the overlap between them, and invites us to think about how we distinguish them. In this paper, I plan to briefly note the ways in which the initial labelling of "digital humanities" and "new media" reflect anxiety about the temporality embedded in each of these fields, and then to focus on how the struggle for self-definition associated with digital humanities reflects the larger conversation taking place in higher education—and at this convention—about the future of the humanities. This conference has been unusual in the thematic resonance and coherence of multiple statements reinforcing the same theme: the inevitability of dramatic changes in higher education, and the need to consider the impact of those changes on the humanities in particular. The digital humanities are clearly an important site for this conversation about how to negotiate change in the academy.

A number of speakers at the conference have noted the need to transform not just our thinking but our scholarly practices, and to re-examine concrete aspects of institutional structure like the shape of the dissertation, or standards for tenure and promotion. It is important to recognize that **the boundaries of our disciplines** are the foundations of most of these institutional structures, from individual faculty appointments to departments, programs, and the budgets that support them,/ so thinking intentionally about how we position new fields is crucial to shaping the trajectory they will follow in the future.

The very name "digital humanities" represents a paradoxical marriage of traditional, collective wisdom about the past with an insistence on describing that content through the contemporary technology in which it is instantiated or through which it is accessed. The absence of analogous "digital sciences" or "digital social sciences" reflects a recognition of the humanities as the area of greatest tension between technological form and traditional content. By defining technology-enabled research as a separate field, humanists have, I will argue, both validated and segregated it, and this move has important implications for the humanities as a whole.

--The creation of the term "digital humanities," an evolution that has been well documented by Matthew Kirschenbaum and Patrik Svensson, reflected in part a strategic desire to replace what was first known as "humanities computing" with a formulation that placed the emphasis more strongly on the humanities side of the equation (Kirschenbaum 3). At the same time, the addition of the more up-to-date word "digital" exerts a gravitational pull into the present and future that promises to counterbalance the dead weight of the past. Cathy N. Davidson notes that humanistic knowledge, unlike scientific knowledge, is seldom viewed in terms of "discovery." "Insight, analysis, logic, speculation, historical knowledge, linguistic mastery, geographical precision, aesthetic production, or complex religious understanding are somehow not 'new' -- even when they are" (Davidson 2004). Digital humanities brings a welcome aura of discovery to the field.

--For media studies, too, marking the insertion of new work into the field still seems to require maintaining some continuity with the past.   A major contribution of the field of media studies has in fact been the example it provides for understanding and embracing the layering of form upon form that constitutes the multimodal, multimedia landscape in which we live. The popularity of the word "remediation," used by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin to describe the tendency of media to incorporate and represent earlier media, shows the broad applicability of the idea that new forms do not replace old ones, but transform them.

 Media studies had previously taken for granted its status as the place to study the new, but as the pace of media formation increased, the fear of seeming outmoded required tagging the field with that adjective whenever a new digital form—wiki, blog, videogame, vidding—entered the picture. As Alan Liu notes: "The very phrase "new media"… stages an exaggerated encounter between *old* and *new*. No media change, it seems, is imaginable without staging such a temporal encounter." Or, as Marie-Laure Ryan suggests, "The term 'new media' is a sign of our current confusion about where these efforts are leading and our breathlessness at the pace of change." (Ryan 3). The existence of Paul Levinson's 2009 book entitled New New Media suggests the term's vulnerability to instantaneous obsolescence, and media theorist Mark Hansen has suggested that the term embodies a form of "presentism" that valorizes the present moment above both past and future.

*Thus, the names bestowed on these emerging areas explicitly addressed the issue of temporality: the humanities reassured us that even that most traditional of fields was now plugged in… while media studies reasserted its willingness to download regular updates.

By stressing their relationship to existing fields, the terms Digital Humanities and New Media typify the kind of "rear-view-mirrorism" that has been aptly noted in relation to technological change more generally (Levinson q/Fitzpatrick; S. Joyce). Describing new technologies in terms that reference their predecessors does have the effect of evoking that which is lost; we may fear that, as with the 'horseless carriage' or the 'wireless radio', the adjective "digital" marks the absence of something crucial in the new humanities: the encounter between individual human minds that has characterized humanistic inquiry for centuries.

A primary goal of naming a new field, like "ecocriticism" or "disability studies," is to identify a coherent subject or methodology, and define an audience of like-minded scholars. An important question to ask, then, is:

--Is digital humanities a field or discipline in the traditional sense? Most of its practitioners would say no. The 2009 UCLA "Manifesto for Digital Humanities" describes it as, "not a field, but an array of convergent practices" (Presner, Todd, et. al.). Lisa Spiro points out that as "the digital humanities community includes people with different disciplines, methodological approaches, professional roles, and theoretical inclinations" (Spiro 16), defining digital humanities is a difficult task. Moreover, digital humanities continues to be vexed by the conflicting claims of an inclusive, so-called "Big Tent Digital Humanities," and the desire of some to see membership earned by a level of expertise and engagement that takes time to acquire.

--The sheer newness of digital humanities and new media is a major source of their appeal, yet also creates an extraordinary burden. Bethany Nowviskie, in "The Eternal September," has written compellingly about the extra work created for experienced digital humanists by constant requests for advice and assistance from those who are new to the field, and the frustration that comes from the very fact that "they think that all this is new," as if others had not spent many years paving the way (Nowviskie 245).

To some degree that burden is borne not only by individuals but by the field as a whole. The embracing of digital humanities as "the next big thing"; the invocation throughout this conference and elsewhere of digital humanities as a kind of metaphor for the fresh winds of change; the press accounts that seize on digital humanities as an example of the humanities' willingness, finally, to get with the program: it seems that the digital humanities are being treated as the potential saviors of the entire field of humanistic inquiry. That level of intervention is probably beyond its powers – and that rhetoric of newness is going to get old.

--This is a real question about the future of the field as a whole: when the sheer novelty of incorporating digital work into humanistic disciplines begins to fade, will scholars have the discipline to do the hard work of digital humanities, and will institutions be willing to support it? With all of our discussion of budget cuts in the humanities, I have heard very few people confront the contradiction implicit in addressing this fiscal emergency by placing all of our eggs in a more expensive basket. We need to ask: who will pay the high cost of providing technical resources for digital humanities when funding agencies no longer view this as a jump start, or shot in the arm, to lead the humanities out of crisis? The work of individual scholars will have to be absorbed into the budgets of universities and colleges. Speaking as a provost, I can say that I am not sure it will prove to be the salvation of humanities if in ten years humanists seem as "irrelevant" as ever—yet are now as expensive as scientists.

--Digital humanities needs to be understood not as a separate field, but as a standard form of scholarly communication. The decision of the MLA to recast its office of scholarly publication as an office of Scholarly Communication was a critical intervention in what Sidonie Smith has called a "reconceptualization of our scholarly ecology": the evolution of a new understanding of scholarship as an ongoing conversation about ideas, not simply a collection of published products. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, in her role as director of scholarly communications for MLA and in her writing, first in blog and now in book form, on *Planned Obsolescence,* has emphasized the continuity between old methods of communication, like print publication, that represented dialogue between scholars that might take place over decades or centuries, and new methods of communication that allow that conversation to take place in real time.

Acknowledging that even "finished" works are part of an ongoing dialogue is the first step towards appreciating the value of digital scholarship that may create opportunities and affordances rather than producing products. This in turn may help defuse the fetishization of productivity that increases the expectation of scholarly output while simultaneously decreasing our capacity to engage in dialogue about the works of others, creating what Mark Bauerlein recently described as a "supersaturation" of humanities research (Bauerlein). **In this way, the need to recognize and validate digital work differently provides a paradigm that is useful and extendable to the profession as whole.

--This new paradigm of scholarly communication also requires that we break down the traditional division between teaching, scholarship, and service, a separation that poses particular problems for digital humanities. Having participated in an NEH seminar last summer on "Evaluating Digital Scholarship," and having been co-leader of a pre-convention workshop here on the same subject, I am struck by the artificial difficulty those three rigid categories create when one is assessing a colleague's overall value to an institution. The question asked again and again with regard to work in digital media is: what counts? The question is not really does it count, but how? If digital work supports pedagogy, it goes into the 'teaching' bucket and will not help the candidate's scholarly profile. If a digital project functions as a tool that is useful to other colleagues or the broader scholarly community, it counts as 'service.' The more capacious definition that is now evolving of scholarly "communication" holds out the promise of blurring or even erasing those boundaries. *It is important that we recognize that teaching, scholarship, and service are all forms of scholarly communication that simply address different audiences. * For humanists of the future, one's intellectual contribution

may be assessed not according to whether it is scholarly "publication," but according to what audience—students, fellow scholars, one's own campus, the general public—the work engages, and what the outcome of that engagement might be in the work of others.

While we may bemoan a lack of public understanding and support for humanities scholarship, I believe the public would value our scholarship more if we did not so rigorously separate it from our other functions as <u>teachers</u> and members of a broader intellectual community. Though many of us identify ourselves first and foremost as disciplinary scholars, to everyone else – students, tuition-paying parents, boards of trustees, state governments, and the general public – our primary identity is as teachers, and we forget that at our peril.

--**Just as we need to open up scholarly communication, we need to fight our tendency to wall off areas of expertise into increasingly specialized subfields, and instead integrate new work like digital humanities and new media into the discipline as a whole**. Jerome McGann has recently suggested that as useful as digital humanities programs and centers have been, "we now have a pressing need to integrate online humanities scholarship into the programmatic heart of the university" (192). Only in this way, he suggests, can we create a "usable future" for the humanities. William Pannapacker notes that "we are reaching a consensus about the future of our profession that will involve not just language and literature, but all of the humanities in partnership with technologists, scientists, and information professionals." He predicts that "it will become increasingly difficult to say what the humanities disciplines represent, by themselves—and to target them for elimination—because we are enmeshed increasingly in the transformation of every discipline in higher education."

It seems clear that the public will no longer subsidize conversations that take place entirely among ourselves. Similarly, within academic institutions, the **limited funds available to support research are likely to distributed in a way that promises greatest impact**. Interdisciplinary appointments, collaborative research centers, and broad-based curricula are essential components of an effort to incorporate this work into the academy in a way that strengthens and enrichens the intellectual community as a whole.

--**It is worth reinforcing again that this intellectual community must include students.** Even the most elite research universities are not immune from the pressure to justify their high tuitions, and their very existence, by fulfilling their mission to educate undergraduates as well as graduate students. Breaking down the barrier between research and teaching, and allowing students to become part of our research agendas in the way that scientists always have, will give that research additional relevance and support among parents, donors, and government agencies.

--**Perhaps more than the specific modes of analysis it offers, the kind of openness and collaboration that has always been a fundamental value of the digital humanities community may be its greatest gift to the humanities**. *The humanities are, after all, the original open source learning platform. * The humanities once spoke to wide audiences about fundamental and important questions. Our current state of crisis comes from our readiness to limit our roles as educators to educating ourselves. Recognizing and building upon the broadly collaborative nature of our intellectual past/ is the surest path to a richly humanistic future.

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