Introduction

Julianne Nyhan and Melissa Terras
University College London, UK

Edward Vanhoutte
Royal Academy of Dutch Language & Literature, Belgium
University College London, UK

Searchinge out a holiday gifte for yower academic frendes? Thei maye enjoye a definicioun of the digital humanities.

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Much has been written about how digital humanities might be defined but, for those new to the discipline, where does one start in tackling this issue? The aim of this volume is to bring together, in one teaching-focused text, core historical and contemporary reading on the act of defining ‘digital humanities’ to demonstrate aspects of the history of the field, to indicate the range of opinions that exist and to encourage others to articulate what it is we think we do when we do digital humanities.

Why would one define an academic field? From one perspective such definitions have an obvious practical and utilitarian purpose: we must be able to define and describe what it is that we are doing not only to colleagues and students but to university management, funding agencies and the general public. Nevertheless, we should not view such work from this practical perspective alone. The ways that digital humanities are being (and have been) defined can reveal much about the implicit assumptions that we as a community hold. So too the act of defining can reveal much about the identities that we are in the process of forging for ourselves, how we view ourselves in relation to other disciplines and the internal tensions that exist within the digital humanities community as a whole. In short the ever growing literature on defining digital humanities can offer us an important insight into the dynamics of disciplinary formation. A condensed selection of this literature is presented in this volume, which features the most popular items listed as set reading within Digital Humanities courses, as ascertained from a content analysis of the syllabi of a range of courses
around the world.\textsuperscript{1} There is core material, of course, that does not appear in this volume due to harsh editorial choices that had to be made, or copyright and licensing issues. As well as the core material presented here, we therefore give a list of suggested further reading: we hope that any student or practitioner in digital humanities who becomes conversant with this literature will understand the many facets to the question: how do you define the digital humanities?

Defining the remit and scope of our discipline seems to be a central concern to many in the field. Aspects of this literature (which could not in all cases be included in this volume) will now be presented and some pertinent themes pointed to. For convenience the term ‘digital humanities’ will be used throughout, even though, as will be made clear (particularly in Chapter 6, written for this volume), many other terms were used to refer to this field before 2005.

Nomenclature and Boundaries

Over the past years, the field that we now refer to as digital humanities has been known by many terms: humanities computing, humanist informatics, literary and linguistic computing and digital resources in the humanities, to name but a few. Most recently it has predominantly been known as digital humanities, though other variations such as eHumanities are occasionally to be found in literature emanating from continental Europe (see, for example, Neuroth et al., 2009 though agreement on the synonymy of these terms is not universal. Matthew G. Kirschenbaum has noted that ‘the rapid and remarkable rise of digital humanities as a term can be traced to a set of surprisingly specific circumstances’ (Kirschenbaum, 2010, p. 2). These he identifies as the 2005 publication of Blackwell’s \textit{Companion to Digital Humanities}, the name that was chosen at the end of 2005 for the organisation that arose out of the amalgamation of the Association for Computers in the Humanities and the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing (that is, the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, ADHO) and the 2006 launch of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) digital humanities programme (Kirschenbaum, 2010, p. 3). Though digital humanities has had its ‘own’ journals since \textit{Computers and the Humanities} was first published in 1966, it is clear that one important effect of the rise of the term ‘digital humanities’ is in the practicality of enabling scholars to self-identify as digital humanities scholars. The importance of this seemingly obvious advantage is reflected

\textsuperscript{1} Syllabi of different courses in Digital Humanities have been collected by Lisa Spiro and are available at http://www.zotero.org/groups/digital_humanities_education.
in Willard McCarty’s discussion of the difficulties of compiling a comprehensive bibliography of the field. Discussing the bibliographies that were published in *Literary and Linguistic Computing Journal* (LLC) from 1986 until 1994 he observed that by 1994:

finding and gathering relevant publications exhaustively had become impractical: too many of them, in too many disciplines, appearing in minor, as well as major places in many languages. The assimilation of computing into the older disciplines meant that, increasingly, much of the relevant work, when mentioned at all, had become subsumed in articles and books whose titles might give no clue. (McCarty, 2003a, p. 1226)

Indeed, it seems likely that the increasing currency of the term digital humanities will play an important role in helping to consolidate the community. Nevertheless, scholars such as Svensson (2009), Unsworth (2010), Terras (2011) and Rockwell (2011) have reflected on the issues of inclusion and exclusion in digital humanities, while Galina and Priana (2011) have examined the internationalisation of the community from the perspective of South America. According to Rockwell, ‘We are a point of disciplinary evolution that calls for reflection, grace, and a renewed commitment to inclusion. Above all we need to critically review our history and our narrative of exclusion and inclusion lest it blind us to needs of the next generation’ (Rockwell, 2011).

What DH is and is not

Judging by the 1966 foreword to *Computers and the Humanities* (the field’s first journal) at that time digital humanities was not considered as being distinct from traditional humanities:

We define humanities as broadly as possible. Our interests include literature of all times and countries, music, the visual arts, folklore, the non-mathematical aspects of linguistics, and all phases of the social sciences that stress the humane. When, for example, the archaeologist is concerned with fine arts of the past, when the sociologist studies the non-material facets of culture, when the linguist analyzes poetry, we may define their intentions as humanistic; if they employ computers, we wish to encourage them and to learn from them. (Prospect, 1966, p. 1)

A number of the writings that were published between 1980 and 2000 focused on defining the field in terms of how it might be taught. For example, between 1996 and 2000 a consortium of European universities
participated in a project called Advanced Computing in the Humanities (ACO*HUM). The book that resulted from the network explores how digital humanities might be taught, thus implicitly exploring what it was then considered to be:

Computer technology has mediated in the development of formal methods in humanities scholarship. Such methods are often much more powerful than traditional research with pencil and paper. They include, for instance, parsing techniques in computational linguistics, the calculus for expressive timing in music, the use of exploratory statistics in formal stylistics, visual search in art history, and data mining in history. Although scientific progress is in the first place due to better methods, rather than solely due to better computers, new advanced methods strongly rely on computers for their validation and effective use. Put in a different way, if you are going to compare two texts, you can do it with traditional pencil and paper; but if you are going to compare fifty texts with each other, you need sound computational methods. (de Smedt et al., 1999, chapter 1)

Terras (2006, p. 230–1) has given a comprehensive overview of relevant literature from this educational perspective. A persistent theme has been the question of the interrelatedness of the traditional and digital humanities. On the one hand, many scholars have emphasised the many ways that digital humanities furthers, or at least allows us to reconnect with, age-old concerns of the humanities. Katz (2005, p. 108) has written that, ‘For the humanist perhaps nothing is more important than the capacity to organise and search large bodies of information’. Turkel has reflected on how the seemingly age-old distinction between thinking and doing in the humanities is not as old as some like to think:

Just because the separation between thinking and making is long-standing and well-entrenched doesn’t make it a good idea. At various times in the past, humanists have been deeply involved in making stuff: Archimedes, the Banu Musa brothers, da Vinci, Vaucanson, the Lunar Men, Bauhaus, W. Grey Walter, Gordon Mumma. The list could easily be multiplied into every time and place. (Turkel, 2008, par. 5)

Recently Moulin et al. (2011) have argued that, as unlikely as it may seem, it was the humanities that brought the earliest research infrastructures into being (p. 3).

Setting boundary lines between digital humanities, what it is and is not has also concerned many. In 2002, for example, Unsworth reflected that the mere use of the computer in humanities research does not make that research digital humanities:
One of the many things you can do with computers is something that I would call humanities computing, in which the computer is used as tool for modelling humanities data and our understanding of it, and that activity is entirely distinct from using the computer when it models the typewriter, or the telephone, or the phonograph, or any of the many other things it can be. (Unsworth, 2002)

This is a point that is echoed by both Orlandi (2002) and de Smedt (2002), choosing the evocative analogy that

The telescope was invented in 1608 and was initially thought useful in war. Galileo obtained one, improved it a little, and used it to challenge existing ideas about the Solar System. Although a magnificent new technology in itself, the telescope was hardly a scientific tool until Galileo used it to create new knowledge. (de Smedt, 2002, p. 99)

Orlandi (2002), while not denying the potential of the computer to fundamentally change humanities, argued that ‘part of the humanities was “computed” well before computers were used’. Willard McCarty, one of the most prolific contributors to the questions of what digital humanities is, meanwhile stated, ‘I celebrate computing as one of our most potent speculative instruments, for its enabling of competent hands to force us all to rethink what we trusted that we knew’ (2009; see also McCarty, 1998, 1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2006 and 2008; McCarty and Kirschenbaum, 2003a; and McCarty and Short, 2002).

Since 2009, when William Pannapacker described digital humanities as ‘the next big thing’ in the Chronicle of Higher Education, a number of articles, blog posts (and even a Downfall detournement2) have been appearing, with increased alacrity, exploring and defining what digital humanities is and is not.

Alvarado (2011) argues that the term digital humanities is ‘a social category, not an ontological one’. At the time of writing a common theme is whether one must programme or not in order to be a digital humanist. At one end of the spectrum is Stephen Ramsay, who wrote, ‘If you are not making anything, you are not … a digital humanist’ (Ramsay, 2011a, further sketched out in his blog post featured in this volume). At the other end is Marc Sample (2011) who argues that, ‘The digital humanities is not about building, it’s about sharing’. Another important theme is the perceived lack of theory in digital humanities, which has been explored by, among others, Liu (2011) and Rockwell (2011).

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2 http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/ccManager/clips/5-ccdowfall.mov/view.
Answering the question ‘What is digital humanities?’ continues to be a rich source of intellectual debate for scholars. In addition to the blog posts and articles discussed above the question has also been explored over the past three years as part of the ‘Day in the life of the Digital Humanities’ community publication project that brought together digital humanists from around the world to document their activities on that day.\(^3\) Gibbs (2011) has proposed a categorisation of these definitions in a useful post that reveals the many differing interpretations that are current. Indeed, at the current time, not only does a comprehensive definition appear to be impossible to formulate, when the breadth of work that is covered by a number of recent and forthcoming companions is considered (e.g. Crawford, 2009; Deegan and Sutherland, 2009; Greengrass and Hughes, 2008; Schreibman and Siemens, 2008; Schreibman et al., 2004; Siemens and Moorman, 2006; Sutherland, 1997; also see the Further Reading section in this volume), it might ultimately prove unproductive, by fossilising an emerging field and constraining new, boundary-pushing work. Terras (2006, p. 242) has asked whether a definition of the field is essential and reflected that such an absence may offer its practitioners additional freedom when deciding their research and career paths. This seems to hold true in Sinclair and Gouglas and their discussion of the establishment of the Humanities Computing MA programme at the University of Alberta. In the context of designing the MA, they choose not to ask what humanities computing is, but rather ‘what do we want humanities computing to be?’ (2002, p. 168). McCarty has argued for the fundamental importance of the self-reflection that appears so prominently in the literature of the field, and comments: ‘What is humanities computing? This, for the humanities, is a question not to be answered but continually to be explored and refined’ (2003a, p. 1233).

It is with this in mind that we wished to publish *Defining Digital Humanities: a Reader*. By capturing a selection of the various journal articles and blog postings, many of which respond to one another, we can provide in one volume the core necessary readings of our discipline and, in doing so, provide a set text for students beginning to engage in this field, and a volume for others to refer to in order to discuss how we wended to the place we are at today, where everyone defines digital humanities, but there is not a definition we all adhere to. We have chosen the contents of this volume based on their popularity within the discipline, the core themes that they highlight, and the relationships between the different pieces. As well as reprinting key articles and blog posts (some of which are re-edited and updated for this volume), we provide an introduction from the editors

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to place and explain the importance of journal articles, and an addendum from most authors, to provide a contemporary review of their piece. We also provide a new chapter by Edward Vanhoutte, explaining the historical shift from humanities computing to digital humanities, a selected further reading list, and a list of questions to aid a discussion about this topic in class. We will expand, maintain, and explore our reading list and point to other media which tackle the definition of digital humanities, including posters, images, manifestos and book cover art, at the companion website to the volume.4

We do not try to define digital humanities ourselves: our editorial perspective is to highlight the range of discussions that attempt to scope out the limits and purview of the discipline. We hope that this volume is of interest both to those new to the discipline and established scholars in the field, to frame the debate on how best to define digital humanities.

Bibliography


4 http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/definingdh and on Twitter @DefiningDH.


McCarty, W., 2010. Inaugural lecture: Attending from and to the machine. King’s College London.


