It is time to address the Public Communication of DH

Julianne Nyhan <j_dot_nyhan_at_ucl_dot_ac_dot_uk>, UCL

Abstract

This introduction addresses two facets of the communication of Digital Humanities (DH) that have framed this special edition of *DHQ*. I begin by discussing a number of articles about DH that have relatively recently appeared in mainstream newspapers. I then observe that a number of these articles not only show an impoverished understanding of the field's frame of reference but also misrepresent various aspects of it, for example, its interrelationship with the Humanities. Given that many academic publications on the question "what is DH?" have appeared in recent years, yet DH is, nonetheless, misrepresented in this way, I propose that the field must look again at the communication of its activities "in the round." Now that DH is arguably moving from the margins to the mainstream I propose that the time has come to address what we might call the "Public Communication of DH" so that we can better communicate to the general public and academics working in other disciplines what it is that we do. As the nature of DH's relationship to the Humanities is one that is frequently misrepresented in the mainstream media I propose that this would be an important area for endeavours in the "Public Communication of DH" to address and explore as early as possible. The articles included in this special edition enrich and expand ongoing conversations about the nature of this relationship. In doing so they make available a wealth of case studies, arguments and insights that can, in due course, be drawn on to further the "Public Communication of DH."

The problem of DH in the mainstream media

Criticism of Digital Humanities (DH) is nothing new. This was often alluded to by those who participated in the oral history interviews that were carried out as part of the "Hidden Histories of computing in the Humanities project, 1949-present" [Nyhan, Flinn and Welsh 2015]. For example, Rockwell reflected on the various types of opposition his work met with at an earlier stage of his career. He recalled being asked: "Why are [you] running computing classes? This is like Pencils in the Humanities." ... [I also heard] "you guys are intellectually lightweight" [and encountered] "blatant sarcasm and ignorance" [Rockwell, Nyhan, Welsh and Salmon 2012]. Indeed, numerous references to such opposition can be found in the literature of the field. The newsletter of the *Association for Computers and the Humanities* (ACH) is particularly intriguing in this regard. For example, Mary Dee Harris (then President of ACH) wrote:

[1]

> In 1970 I was accused of trying to "destroy literature" and now the 1984 MLA Convention Program lists 10 meetings devoted to Computer Assisted Instruction and Research... It is an indication of the changing times...the profession has largely accepted computers as a part of the discipline...even though not everyone is involved in using computers, they are no longer viewed as threatening. [Harris 1984]

Hopeful as Harris was, it is clear that DH is once again viewed as "threatening." This is evidenced by a flurry of essays and opinion pieces that have appeared over the last few years in publications with far greater reach than the typical academic journal. Kirsch, writing in the *New Republic,* portrays DH as a disorganised and ineffectual amalgam that is as unable to define itself as convincingly demonstrate that it can create new knowledge. Such ineptitude notwithstanding, Kirsch goes on to argue that DH poses an existential threat to the Humanities. The revolutionary rhetoric that often accompanies DH has an "undertone of menace, the threat of historical illegitimacy and obsolescence" [Kirsch 2014]. So too he depicts the (implicitly) distinctive and expansive modus operandi of DH — where building and tool-making tend to be viewed on par with thinking and writing, and where images can be used to communicate, critique or collaborate with words — as chillingly unpropitious: "In this vision, the very idea of language as the basis of a humane education — even of human identity — seems to give way to a post- or pre-verbal discourse of pictures and objects. Digital humanities becomes another name for the obsequies of

[2]

humanism" [Kirsch 2014]. The instrumentalist and results-orientated nature that is supposed of DH is reiterated once more in the closing line as Humanists are warned to guard against the decoy that is DH because "[t]he danger is that they will wake up one morning to find that they have sold their birth right for a mess of apps" [Kirsch 2014].

The allegedly reductionist and anti-Humanities nature of DH is invoked in articles in various other mainstream publications too. O'Connell, writing in the *The New Yorker* remarks:

> As far as I could tell, there was a general skepticism about the digital humanities, combined with a certain measure of unease — arising, perhaps, from the vague aura of utility, even of outright science, emanating from the discipline, and the sense that this aura was attracting funding that might otherwise have gone to more low-tech humanities projects. [O'Connell 2014]

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Writing in *The Los Angeles Review of Books* in 2012, Marche castigated DH as part of the creeping, and seemingly inexorable, computerisation of all aspects of our lives, when he argued that "literature is not data" [Marche 2012]. This is a thread that was again taken up in an article in *The New York Times* that, ostensibly at least, positioned itself as a supporter of DH. Chillingly, we here find that its promise is characterised as "the transformation of the humanities into science. By 'science' I mean using numbers to test hypotheses" [Leroi 2015]. Not only does the article reduce DH to a discipline that is exclusively concerned with quantitative methods but, in contrast with the Humanities, it is depicted as one that deploys such methods in a completely neutral and non-hermeneutic way:

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> It's easy to see how it will go. A traditional, analog, scholar will make some claim about the origin, fate or significance of some word, image, trope or theme in some Great Work. He'll support it with apt quotations, and fillet the canon for more of the same. His evidence will be the sort that natural scientists call "anecdotal" — but that won't worry him since he's not doing science. ... But then a code-capable graduate student will download the texts — not just the canon, but a thousand more — run the algorithms, produce the graphs, estimate the p values, and show the claim to be false, if false it indeed is. There will be no rejoinder; the analog scholar won't even know how to read the results. Quantification has triumphed in field after field of the natural and social sciences. It will here, too. [Leroi 2015]

I could enumerate various other examples of such articles; however, my point is, I hope, beginning to emerge. In the mainstream media DH is frequently depicted as a threat to the Humanities and as an instrumentalist and theoretically-naïve endeavour. Furthermore, it is also frequently depicted in a way that few of those who work in DH are likely to be able to relate to. This was often reflected in the social media conversations that followed the publication of such pieces and Twitter discussions that took place after the publication of some of the articles discussed above. In response to [Leroi 2015], Barker tweeted "This article would be better entitled 'misunderstanding the digital humanities'" (Feb 18).

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In the main, the replies from within the DH community have tended to focus on the respective articles' shortcomings. For example, Schnapp et al's response to Kirsch emphasizes the logical flaws, oversights and factual errors that the article contains. They argue that he has an impoverished understanding of the scholarship of the history of the book, that he accords New Criticism a vim that has long departed it and they briefly touch on his misrepresentation of the aims and practices of DH [Schnapp 2014]. Such responses are important and necessary. However, they do not go far enough or recognize the more fundamental issue that I believe to be at stake, namely the discipline's current shortcomings in the context of what we might think of as the "Public Communication of DH" and the necessity of approaching this in a more systematic and expert way, as I will now argue.

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Reflecting on Popular Depictions of DH

By my lights, the most telling aspects of the articles discussed above are that they (i) do not accurately describe the aims or scholarship of DH (ii) are written by people who are not experts in DH and (iii) appear in mainstream media with large readerships. That the second and third points are true should be a matter for concern because they emphasize that DH does not currently have a place at the table of mainstream media communication. In short, the communication of what our discipline does, has done and aims to do is being left to others who are not necessarily expert in it.

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That the first point should be true is immensely puzzling when one considers the very many contributions that have been written on the topic "What is DH?" (see, for example, [Terras, Nyhan, and Vanhoutte 2013] and less formal explorations such

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as the "Day of Digital Humanities" [Rockwell et al. 2012].

Of course, one might counter that authors such as Kirsch are referencing wider discourses about neoliberalisation and, far from misunderstanding DH, they are intentionally misrepresenting it as a handmaiden of those who seek to commercialise higher education. I'll return to this point later. For now, I want to counter it by recalling the many references that one can find to how poorly DH is understood outside of expert circles, for example, "As such, digital humanities is the consummate academic hot-button topic: Everyone has vehement opinions, but few actually know what they're talking about" [Schuman 2014]. For me, a sense of cognitive dissonance is created by, on the one side, the wealth of literature that exists on the topic "What is DH?" and, on the other side, the limited understanding of answers to that question given in the articles discussed above (and that appears to exist outside of the field more generally).

For the most part DH has not, so far, managed to communicate its values and aims in a way that can easily be understood by many scholars from other disciplines, journalists, non-fiction writers and the general public. Neither has DH managed to adequately communicate (if alone in the sense that this is a much discussed question within the field) the complex nature of its interrelationship with the Humanities to this wider audience. In pointing this out my aim is not to criticise extant "What is DH literature?" on the grounds that it has not managed to communicate its message to wider audiences: on the whole, academic literature does not tend to be written for non-specialist audiences. Rather, my aim is to point out that the increasing institutionalisation and professionalization of DH requires us to think about and plan for our discipline in ways that have not really been necessary up to now. I believe that criticism such as that contained in the media articles discussed above is potentially very valuable because it alerts us to the ways that DH is being (mis)understood by those who do not work in the field and it alerts us to the necessity of responding in a more systematic way than we have up to now.

On the Public Communication of DH

McCarty's Busa lecture [McCarty 2014] evoked the virtues of periodically looking up from the day-to-day research that so thoroughly absorbs and enthralls us in order to ponder the longer-term research agenda of DH. To his ruminations on the research trajectory of the field I wish to add a proposal in the context of what might be seen as the strategy and foresight of the field, namely the necessity of appointing chairs in the "Public Communication of DH." Perhaps pipeline issues will make the appointment of chairs difficult in the short term. Yet, at the very least, I believe that our scholarly associations should support initiatives that could foster the development of such expertise in the longer term while advocating to those who control the purse strings about the importance of such appointments. As I will now outline, I believe that a new field in the "Public Communication of DH" could draw on (and further complement) the expertise already present in the field of the "Public Communication of Science". I suggest this not only because of the field's demonstrable expertise in the communication of scholarly research but also because of the various affinities that seem to exist between it and DH. For example, the current DH situation seems to me rather similar to one description of the motivations that lay behind activities in the area of the public communication of science in the 1970s: "[it] involved broader groups within the scientific communities and reflected, at least in part, a concern that the good (p.2) news was not being heard – even that the respect and reputation of science needed to be salvaged" [Bucchi, Massimiano, and Trench 2008, 1–2]. I will now present a brief sketch of the origins and current shape of Science Communication along with some other examples of the affinities that seem to exist between it and DH.

The public communication of science: a sketch

An awareness of the necessity of communicating to the general public about science, and advocating for its benefits (and, sometimes, limitations), preceded the professionalization of science in the mid-19th century [Bucchi, Massimiano, and Trench 2008, 1]. Battifoglia, for example, has reconstructed "the history of science popularisation through analysis of popular science magazines published in Italy from 1788 to 2002" [Battifoglia 2004]. Various specialised bodies and associations that addressed the furthering of science were founded in the 19th century [Bucchi, Massimiano, and Trench 2008, 1]. For example, in 1848 the American Association for the Advancement of Science, an "an international non-profit organization dedicated to advancing science for the benefit of all people" [AAAS] was founded. Notwithstanding its relative longevity, today the issue as to whether Science Communication is a separate and fully fledged field or a subdiscipline of fields such as the Sociology of Science, Science and Technology Studies or Media Studies etc., remains contentious. In any case, structures that are often taken as hallmarks of disciplinarity (dedicated peer reviewed conferences, journals and scholarly associations) have existed in it since the 1970s [Gascoigne et al. 2010, 2]. The following is a useful overview of the field's

frame of reference:

> Science communicators think of the media as another form of discourse...science communication deals with the diffusion, propagation and appropriation of scientific knowledge in different context, for different purpose, with different effects (intended or unintended), and the paradigms employed qualify these processes. Most of the time we deal with non-formal knowledge of scientific knowledge, which could be (depending on the theoretical frame of reference we use) representations, misinterpretations, misconceptions, preconceptions, everyday knowledge, or common sense knowledge. [Gascoigne et al. 2010, 4]

Furthermore, it also tends to have a political and activist dimension: "In the years before, during and after World War II, a generation of scientists with twin commitments to political activism and science sought to explain contemporary science and its benefits to the 'common man.'" [Bucchi, Massimiano, and Trench 2008, 1] Aside from affinities with DH in terms of the latter's emerging political and activist dimensions, this is also relevant in the context of the mainstream portrayal of DH mentioned above. As I wrote, one might argue that Kirsch (and others) wilfully misrepresent DH for political ends. Even if this were true, I don't believe that it would undermine the necessity of addressing the public communication of DH. Rather, it draws attention to how narratives about "science" (in the sense of *wissenschaft*) can serve political (and other) agendas, and the public should be as aware of this in knowledge dissemination contexts as they are in terms of commercial advertising. [13]

This editorial is not the place to address particulars about the scope or implementation of the proposed sub-field in the Public Communication of DH; however, a closer look at some high profile appointments such as the Simonyi Professorship for the Public Understanding of Science in Oxford University in the UK emphasise the many promising points of departure that already exist. Firstly, as I have assumed in the above, such a post could aim to communicate with not only the general public but also with scholars in other academic disciplines. That this should ideally be an aspect of the Simonyi Chair is made clear in the manifesto written at the time it was set up: [14]

> [the aim of the post is to] make important contributions to the public understanding of some scientific field rather than study the public's perception of the same. By "public" we mean the largest possible audience, provided, however, that people who have the power and ability to propagate or oppose the ideas (especially scholars in other sciences and in humanities, engineers, journalists, politicians, professionals, and artists) are not lost in the process. [Simonyi 1995]

The manifesto also explains that such a post is necessary due to the centrality of symbolic expression to the sciences:

> Symbolic expression enables the highest degree of abstraction and thence the utilization of powerful mathematical and data processing tools ensure tremendous progress. At the same time the very means of success tends to isolate the scientists from the lay audience and prevents the communication of the results. Considering the profoundly vital interdependence between the society at large and the scientific world, the dearth of effective information flow is positively dangerous. [Simonyi 1995]

Again, here parallels with DH can be noticed not only due to the role that computation, and thus symbolic manipulation, plays in our discipline but also in the way that some Digital Humanities research results have entered or are entering into the mainstream. The most obvious and widely known example of this is the impact that TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) had on the language that would become the lingua franca of data exchange, XML.

It is also notable that in recent times various appointments in what might be called the "Public Communication of the Humanities" have been made. Following on from the successful "Being Human" festival, which aimed to "show people the best of what we do through a festival of the humanities in which researchers can showcase the latest research, making it accessible to a wider audience and showing that it is relevant to people's lives" [Smith 2014], the University of London's School of Advanced Study's appointed its first chair in public understanding of the humanities, Professor Sarah Churchwell (Anon 2015). The University of Sheffield has also appointed Professor Angie Hobbs as Professor of the public understanding of Philosophy (Anon 2012). While DH has placed itself in the position for advocating for the Humanities through groups such as 4Humanities, it has not addressed in any meaningful way the necessity of communicating what it does to a larger and non-specialist public. Therefore, I have used part of this editorial to make what I hope to have shown is both a convincing and urgent case for such a development. In the next part of this editorial I will explain the rationale of the special edition that [15]

is presented here and give an overview of the contributions that are contained in it.

Digital Humanities and the Humanities

The establishment of a sub-field in the "Public Communication of DH" is clearly a long-term goal. One important issue for it to communicate to non-expert publics will be the nature of DH's relationship to the Humanities. As outlined above, this crucial question is frequently misrepresented in the mainstream media. I propose that this would be an important area for endeavours in the "Public Communication of DH" to address and explore as early as possible. The articles included in this special edition enrich and expand ongoing conversations about the nature of this relationship. In doing so they make available a wealth of case studies, arguments and insights that can, in due course, be drawn on to further the "Public Communication of DH".

Within the professional and non-professional literature of and about DH the nature of the interrelationship that exists between it and the Humanities is much discussed: it has variously, and with varying levels of plausibility, been argued that DH will replace, extend, revolutionize, redeem, save or even destroy the Humanities. This special issue will seek to examine this relationship from a different perspective, namely how and whether DH intersects with one of the most central concerns of many disciplines of the Humanities: problematization. In short, the issue aims to explore not whether DH is solving Humanities' problems; instead it asks how DH is making such problems more difficult, more problematic, more indicative of the Human condition. Though the articles contained in this issue have been written with a broader audience in mind, it is to the professional literature of the field that they seek to make a contribution.

As text is central to the Humanities the focus of this issue is also text; however, in light of how digitization remediates all analog sources into a common binary format the notion of text is here broadly conceived to comprise any source that contains even a single word or graph, whether text-based art, audio-visual materials such as oral history recordings, software and computer programs, visualizations, musical scores etc. It is hoped that this special issue will not only contribute to current understandings of digital text but also that it will shed new light on the relationship between the Humanities and DH in terms of their shared and differing ways of thinking and questioning. In essence, our aim was to explore, or even simply identify, new routes or neglected routes for Humanities and DH scholars to traverse. This theme occurs, to varying degrees, in all the articles selected for inclusion in the issue.

Niels Brüegger's comparison of digitised collections and web archives gives an overview of the fascinating and emerging area of web archives while aiming to understand how different "types of digital material affect different phases of scholarly work." Tanya Clement argues that DH scholars "have made a tradition of problematizing our understanding of textuality within the context of designing information systems for texts that, in many cases, still look like books." She extends this frame of reference by proposing a rationale of audio text and describing a prototype tool for analysing audio collections. Claire Clivaz draws on the history of the book and philosophers like Derrida to argue that the demise of covers and bindings is not a phenomenon that is unique to the digital age; nevertheless, she calls for DH to "dare to depart from ancient bindings and create new boundaries." Arianna Ciula and Cristina Marras focus on a central activity of DH, namely modelling, and set out an exploratory framework (pragmatic modelling) for such practices and then draw on the framework to show how "DH modelling practices challenge epistemological and linguistic restrictions, by, for example, problematising the adoption of terminology belonging to the domain of computer sciences." Stuart Dunn and Mareike Katharina Höckendorff "combine perspectives from historical research and literary criticism to problematize the categorization, computation and representation of events in cultural heritage." Finally, Stan Ruecker contrasts the successes that the sciences have made in "capturing the public imagination" with the situation in the Humanities where cultural and heritage institutions have tended to "provide opportunities for passively consuming cultural production, rather than with the core interest of the Humanities, which is in enriching objects of study by analyzing them through a variety of theoretical lenses." In addition to arguing that the Humanities must learn from the Sciences in this regard he argues that DH has a crucial role to play as "the driving force behind this education."

Conclusion

This article has addressed two facets of the communication of Digital Humanities (DH) and how they have framed this special edition of *DHQ*. Firstly, I argued that the time has now come to address what we might call the "Public Communication of DH" so that we can better communicate to the general public and academics working in other disciplines

what it is that we do. Secondly, I turned to overarching aim of this special edition and the articles that are included in it. Though written with a general audience in mind the articles are not written in a "Public Communication of DH" mode (because DH has not yet developed expertise in this area); rather, they seek to make a contribution to the ongoing question of the nature of the interrelationship that exists between DH and the Humanities.

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