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The Digital Future of Humanities through the Lens of DIY Culture

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Abstract

This paper asks the question: Do the humanities by necessity have a digital future? It argues that the answer to this question is both yes and no. The argument looks through the lens of DIY culture as an attempt to try and understand the future for the humanities in terms of both cultural material and processes. The argument is made first by examining the case of information sharing within DIY culture as an expression of current day cultural material. Secondly, it illustrated how traditional humanities scholarship, such as reading ancient documents, compares to it's DIY equivalent within family history circles, and how both will continue to use digital and non-digital methods.

Introduction

Do the humanities by necessity have a digital future? This question is answered by understanding the humanities as the study of human culture and cultural material, both on and off the Internet. This paper will use *DIY* (Do-It-Yourself) cultural material and practises as a way to understand this. |1|

First the phrase and concept of DIY culture will be unpacked: |2|

DIY culture is here defined as the social world of people engaged in DIY activities, which can be anything from building a shed or knitting a sweater to running a food co-op, with the prerequisite that the practitioner has no relevant formal education or training. DIY culture can, in many ways, be seen as simultaneously an online and an offline culture, with a complex relationship between digital and non-digital activity and interaction. Due to its rising relevance, particularly on the internet, it is important that the humanities include the study of DIY culture and its cultural products - digital, non-digital and everything in between. |3|

The humanities are generally defined as the disciplines that examine human culture, or in other words the products of the human mind, both tangible and intangible, such as music, arts, crafts, rituals, literature and linguistics. The humanities have a long history of attempting to understand these different products of the past and the present. The methods with which these attempts have been made often strongly depend on the formats of the material as well as on the technology that is available to the scholars in question [Bod 2014]. |4|

This paper suggests that cultural material produced by DIY practicioners should be the subject of much future research in the humanities, and through examining both products and practices from DIY culture, we can understand the future of humanities scholarship as both digital and non-digital, online and offline. |5|

DIY culture

DIY culture constitutes an important part of human culture today. Gelber (1999) portrays productive leisure activities (*hobbies*) as an antidote to more problematic leisure activities (e.g. drinking or gambling) and idleness following in the wake of the separation of work and leisure brought on by industrialisation. An antidote supported by authorities: |6|

> Teachers, recreation directors, journalists, and other voices of authority have felt free to encourage

the autonomy and creativity of hobbies because even if they sensed that hobbies could critique regular work, they also recognized that hobbies' triumph over idleness was a victory for the values of a market economy. [Gelber 1999, 3]

In other words: " Hobbies have been a way to confirm the verities of work and the free market inside the home so long as remunerative employment has remained elsewhere." [Gelber 1999, 4]

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Gelber uses the existing term *hobbies* (which after 1880 came to be known as a productive use of free time rather than a dangerous obsession) to talk about productive leisure activities such as collecting, handicrafts, husbandry, amateurism and volunteerism. Stebbins, on the other hand, has hobbies, amateurism and volunteerism side by side as different types of serious leisure pursuits [Stebbins 2007]. In Gelber's view, DIY (which includes crafts and maintenance) is a less creative and more productive hobby focussing on producing something useful and perhaps necessary to the household. Matchar, on the other hand, focuses on the household aspects in the term *new domesticity* - returning to productivity in the home:

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> Our nostalgia for old-fashioned home and hearth has transformed our food culture as well. Who hasn't tried canning jam or making their own pickles? Young women who, had they been of age in the 1990s, might have been boozing it up in the Meatpacking District [New York neighbourhood] are now spending Saturday nights baking cupcakes and photographing them for their food blogs. The kinds of kitchen work once associated with Depression-era farmwives - making curds and whey, preserving sauerkraut, grinding flour - are now thoroughly unremarkable pastimes for young people flush with today's DIY back-to-basics spirit. [Matchar 2013, 3]

Both note that times of recession and economic crises give rise to more work-like and productive leisure activities supported by a media focus on "good-things-to-do when there was nothing to do" [Gelber 1999, 41]. Matchar particularly notes the spread of anti-authoritarian disillusionment and this could be seen as a result of the ease of which ideas and information can and has spread on the internet during the latest recession. The internet furthermore plays a large role in the aspects of DIY and DIY culture.

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DIY culture is here defined as a social world surrounding DIY practitioners. Unruh uses social worlds to refer to a social organisation that cannot be defined by spatial, territorial, formal or membership boundaries [Unruh 1980]. Instead, a social world is defined through interaction and communication. DIY culture exists worldwide and varieties of DIY culture can be seen in most societies. There are no rules on how you engage with DIY culture and anyone can be part of it. Although there are no spatial, territorial, formal or membership boundaries of DIY culture, it exists through interaction and communication.

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When examining DIY culture it is not the DIY activities as such that are the focus. How a sweater is knitted or how the shed is built is secondary here. In fact, the act of knitting a sweater or building a shed is not in itself a DIY activity as these tasks can also be accomplished by professionals with the relevant formal education or training. The focus lies instead on how information is gathered that enables people to build sheds, or the social setting in which someone is motivated and gathers knowledge that enables them to knit the sweater, when they have had no formal training to do so. Thus, it is the autodidact information behaviour, which is the foundation of DIY activities, that is of interest here.

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DIY practitioners have no formal training or education in this particular activity. To "do it yourself" in the rawest form implies being completely self-taught. However, instead of the word self-taught, Solomon suggest using the term autodidactism:

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> So "self-taught" will not quite do as a complete description of the autodidact. We need a word to describe a range of people who prefer to teach themselves or to pick up knowledge from non-teaching situations, in one way or another. [Solomon 2003, 3]

Solomon further argues that from the time they are born humans are constantly being taught, or allowing themselves to be taught:

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> Every time someone speaks, or points out a bird doing something strange on the lawn, or reconfigures the computer slowly enough for us to follow - if we want to, we are being taught.
> [Solomon 2003, 3]

Solomon's understanding of autodidact learning is not one of solitude, but rather one where we are seeking out learning and knowledge from other people. This is closely related to research in Human Information Behaviour, especially that in our everyday life:

> Information Behaviour is the totality of human behaviour in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use. Thus, it includes face-to-face communication with others, as well as the passive reception of information as in, for example, watching TV advertisements, without any intention to act on the information given.
> [Wilson 2000, 49]

Information behaviour [Fisher et al 2006] typically focussed more on one-way access to information and the ways in which the individual can use this information. However, the field of Everyday Life Information Seeking [Savolainen 1995] (ELIS) has lead to a more rounded understanding of information behaviour, which includes the social and collaborative nature of human interaction with information (i.e. the field of CIB - Collaborative Information Behaviour) [Talja and Hansen]. Thus, information behaviour is a complex area of seeking, finding, sharing, creating new and remixing old information. In everyday life this information behaviour becomes even more complex in a world of overlapping tasks for which information is sought, found, shared, presented and even ignored or discarded [Karlova and Fisher 2013]. Therefore, most ELIS studies tend to focus on a certain task or activity for which it is easier to identify a group of participants. This could, for example, be parenting [McKenzie 2003] or health issues [Yeoman 2010] as well as DIY activities such as genealogy [Yakel 2004], knitting [Prigoda and McKenzie 2007], gourmet cooking [Hartel 2010] or heritage [Skov 2013].

Nevertheless, I would argue that there is a general aspect in all DIY activities that usually require a certain amount of autodidact information behaviour in order to engage with the activity. This has been the case since the first mentions of a DIY movement in the 1950s [Mead 1957] where there was an increase in instructions on how-to do it yourself experienced a boom. This how-to genre has developed into a DIY activity in itself and this type of material is ever growing on the Internet and in print. The enormous amounts of information sharing currently going on between DIY practitioners around the world is creating a new type of cultural material that we in the humanities need to understand in order to understand current culture.

On and offline

DIY culture can in many ways be seen as simultaneously an online and an offline culture, with a complex relationship between digital and non-digital activity and interaction. In order to make this argument we will begin by looking at the relationship between time spent on and off the internet, for people of all age groups.

Sigman argues that time spent online displaces face-to-face contact, and he explains how in turn this lack of face-to-face interaction has been shown to relate to increased illness and premature mortality [Sigman 2009]. While the connection between lack of social interaction and health issues is strong, it seems to be more difficult to find specific connections between internet use and health issues. Findings here are more mixed, with some studies showing a more positive correlation. As an example, Cotton and colleagues showed how internet use among older adults (50 years or older) reduced depression categorization by 33%[Cotten et al 2012].

This is furthermore an area where it is important to keep in mind the differences between correlation and causality. If we make the assumption that there is a correlation between a high degree of loneliness and a large amount of time spent online, do people who spend much time online become lonely as a result of less face-to-face contact or is it the case that people who are lonely spend more time online, perhaps in order to achieve more social contact via a digital media? Another suggestion is that there is a third factor involved which causes a high degree of both loneliness and spending time online, for example bullying or a general lack of closeness in one's social network. It is not an easy question to

answer and findings seem to depend on the groups of people that are studied. Staying with the example of loneliness, which can take different shapes (e.g. social or emotional loneliness), the size of social networks can for example have a larger impact on the social loneliness of young adults, while the lack of closeness to other members of a social network can have a larger impact on the social loneliness on older adults [Green et al 2001, 281].

Nevertheless, the internet does provide an opportunity to connect with like-minded people or those with similar interests across large physical as well as social distances.

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In an attempt to teach the elderly to use computers with the prospect of enabling connectivity, as shown above, it made sense to change the focus of the syllabus towards teaching them to use the internet rather than the computer itself[1]. Through this experience I identified the three most important things to teach them about the internet:

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1. How to access information on the internet,
2. How to communicate and interact socially on the internet, and
3. How to express themselves and share information on the internet.

Each step led small groups of elderly individuals to a new level of motivation to use the internet. Despite their expectations at the beginning of the course, at no point were they taught anything particularly technical.

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The tech industry, amongst others, despairs over the lack of understanding of technology [BT 2015] among children, of which 71% (of 5-15 year olds in the UK) [Ofcom n.d.] have access to tablet computers at home, and I am sympathetic to their plight. The future of the tech industry relies on young people interested in working within that discipline and industry. However, we need to consider the following difficult and troubling suggestion: "even though young people grow up surrounded by technology, many of them don't understand the basic concepts of how it works – which will leave them unable to fully participate in society" [BT 2015]. Statements like this assume that an understanding of how the internet and the technology behind the internet works is necessary for participation in society. But does technology shape society or culture, or is it culture and society that shape technology?

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Technology is a product of the human mind, not the other way around. So perhaps the issue with young people's understanding of the internet is that they understand it differently from those who did not grow up with it. For the older generation a computer is still technology, it is apart from us. For the younger generation, on the other hand, it is perhaps not. For them the computer provides opportunities to connect - the internet an abstraction which they only experience when it is not available.

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Another pertinent question is "will their future necessarily be digital?" Will the younger generation experience very little face-to-face or in-real-life interaction with other people? Mcclure suggests that even babies can differentiate between real live interaction via screen on the one hand and pre-recorded video on the other [Macclure 2013] [LaFrance 2015]. This could mean that for the younger generation communication mediated via screen bears a closer resemblance to physical socialising than to screen entertainment. Thus there is no need to understand technology, in order to socially interact with others via digital media. It is just a means for us as humans to connect, to access information, to express ourselves and of course to be entertained.

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Many people use the internet to express themselves creatively (a large part of DIY culture), some use it to express other very human sentiments, with varying degrees of sympathy. It is intriguing to see how connecting via the internet increasingly opens up to connecting in the physical world. From blogger meetups of the 00's to finding on Ravelry[2] a fellow knitter that lives in your own neighbourhood. The internet is giving us the opportunity to find and connect with people who have similar values and interests; connections that pre-internet would have been very difficult to make.

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The internet has a great influence on DIY culture as much as DIY culture certainly has a great influence on the internet. As mentioned above, a large part of DIY culture is the use of autodidact information behaviour. It does not seem so much to be a question of whether the internet plays a large role in this information behaviour or, if not, in fact autodidact information behaviour lays the foundation for the internet, but rather if the internet would be as widespread as it is today (and continually growing), if we humans did not in the first place engage in autodidact information behaviour?

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But what about the non-digital world - the offline, the physical world? Most DIY activities are in some way very firmly grounded in the physical world. Knitting a sweater is a very physical activity. As is building a shed and running a food co-op. Running a food co-op is particularly physical and social in its very nature. Therefore, while a large part of autodidact information behaviour in DIY culture happens online, there is still a very large part of it that does not.[3] This illustrates that in DIY activities and DIY culture, the digital and the physical, being online and being offline, more often than not go hand in hand. The relationship between digital and physical material and immaterial culture is an interesting new area for the humanities to study, not only within media and information studies but also within arts, crafts, literature, music, heritage, and more. This would in many cases traditionally have been analysed among professional cultural practitioners and their cultural products. However, this paper argues that it may be just as relevant to examine this among DIY practitioners and DIY products.

Humanities in a digital world

An important part of DIY culture today is autodidact information behaviour, much of which (but far from all) is conducted on the internet. One of the results of this is an enormous amount of information, of both high and low quality, flooding the internet. It is generally very difficult to preserve this information [Kasioumis et al 2014], let alone understand it. Attempting to understand products of culture and the human mind produced today is challenging because these materials are very diverse and have increased so immensely in number, particularly within DIY culture. New methods for analysing large amounts of data are currently in focus under the heading of Big Data analysis. However, any analysis of cultural products requires an understanding of the culture and the material [Boyd and Crawford 2012]. There are masses of cultural products out there that we have not yet even begun to consider. At the same time new formats and producers appear every single day, both digital and non-digital, from the 25-year-old DIY music artist with a new single out on vinyl, to the 75 year old DIY gardener with a popular Youtube channel.

Understanding these cultural products is a great challenge for humanities research and will continue to be so in the future. Therefore the answer to the question, "Do the humanities by necessity have a digital future?" must be a resounding "yes and no." Yes, humanities research must attempt to understand cultural productions that are digital. No, because if we look at DIY culture we will see that there most likely will continue to be many cultural productions of non-digital material, which humanities researchers must continue to study and understand. Perhaps the future of the humanities is instead to learn from DIY practitioners and no longer distinguish so sharply between the digital and the non-digital.

Furthermore, while the internet itself relies on technology, I argue that we should not understand the contents of the internet as technological products, but rather the products of the human mind or as cultural products. Historian Roy Rosenzweig made this same point in relation to Wikipedia, saying that it was "the most important application of the principles of the free and open-source software movement to the world of cultural, rather than software, production" [Rosenzweig 2006, 118]. The information shared, the opinions expressed, the communication about common interests and the social interactions stem from humans and not machines. Understanding machines or technology may give us some tools to study the internet, but it will never give us the ability to understand the content. For this we need methods developed for the understanding of cultural products, in other words humanities methods. So, to answer the question again; yes, the humanities do have a necessary digital future in that it will be necessary to use digital tools to study both digital and non-digital material, and no, because without traditional methods for understanding cultural products we simply will not be able to understand either digital or non-digital material.

The implications of this "yes and no" answer can be understood through the following two examples. The first is an example of computer technology aiding humanities scholarship. The premise here was to examine how technology could *aid* a scholar during the *scholar's* reading of ancient documents [Roued-Cunliffe 2010]. The italics are added to emphasise that the scholar's humanities-based methods for reading stayed the same and that technology merely added speed or ease to certain aspects of the process. For example the speed of finding parallel readings in the same or other corpora or the ease with which evidence that supported certain readings is remembered [Roued-Cunliffe 2013]. In this example the materials studied (i.e. ancient documents from the Roman fort of Vindolanda in the North of England[4]) are cultural products that at first were not digital. However, the fragile state of most of these documents as well as the

physical location of the scholars was such that the documents studied were often in fact digital photographs. Here scholars moved from the study of physical objects to the study of digital objects. The methods for studying the documents were very traditional for the field of papyrology. Terras describes the complex and cyclical process in the following way:

> An expert reads an ancient document by identifying visual features, and then incrementally building up knowledge about the document's characters, combinations of characters, words, grammar, phrases, and meaning, continually proposing hypotheses, and checking those against other information, until s/he finds that this process is exhausted [Terras 2005, 54]

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Along the way there are aspects of this process that are typically done by non-digital means but which can alternatively be *aided* by digital technology. First is the identification of visual features where the scholars, in the case of quite illegible incised texts, would typically use a light source to cast a shadow on the document and by tipping the document to and fro this enables the scholar to make out the incisions [Brady et al 2005]. This is a cumbersome and unreliable method and therefore the project attempted to aid this task with digital image processing techniques [Terras 2012]. `33`

The second part of the process is the building up of knowledge about the characters, words and phrases in the document. Typically, this will happen today by keeping digital and non-digital notes about the different interpretations and decisions made along the way. Therefore, attempts were made at showing how a digital "Decision Support System" would enable the scholar to organise and remember these interpretations and the basis on which they were made [Roued-Cunliffe 2013]. `34`

The final part of the process, as described here, is checking against other information. This traditionally required access to copies of published editions that could contain relevant parallels to the documents being studied. Potential parallels would be found by trawling through indices. This is a part of the process of reading ancient documents where digital technology and the internet has had a great influence. By digitally publishing interpreted editions online (using XML), and by making them accessible through search engines this task has become much lighter and has made the texts more easily accessible by scholars around the world. As the example shows, even a traditional digital humanities project that works with digital tools for the reading of handwritten texts continually oscillates between digital and non-digital tools, methods and material. `35`

However, as this second example will show, the reading of handwritten texts is not a method used only by scholars in academia. Genealogy is probably the most well-known DIY activity in which the skill of reading old handwritten texts is quite essential. My own experience of working with family history and engaging with other genealogists has led to a few observations in relation to this skill: `36`

1. Genealogists, depending on their level of experience, usually have some skills in reading handwritten texts, ranging from beginners to experts.
2. These experts are able to read Latin texts, written in a very illegible Gothic script.
3. Experts and beginners alike usually collaborate on the reading of texts that are related to their own family history and they do this both online and offline.
4. Genealogists usually gather the skills and knowledge needed for this task through the different autodidact information situations mentioned above.
5. Genealogists use a greater variety of different digital tools and platforms depending on their level of digital literacy, than I have experienced among scholars.

For these skills particularly, genealogists and other amateur historians are regularly used as volunteer transcribers in museums and archives. With digital media and the internet, GLAM institutions (i.e. galleries, libraries, archives and museums) are now able to structure these skills and use them more efficiently to transcribe material in their collections; in other words, to use these skills in crowdsourcing projects [Ridge 2013]. `37`

This second example suggests that perhaps the skills involved are not what separates the DIY practitioner from the professional practitioner, neither is the need for social networking or collaboration. The motivations for reading handwritten documents are most likely the same, namely recognition and furthering their understanding of the subject at hand. Perhaps what really divides the waters is the information behaviour and whether this is taught or it is autodidact. The consequence of this difference is often that DIY practitioners are in a position to be more adaptable and innovative in their use of digital technology in a way that can be difficult within the organisational structures surrounding the humanities.

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Nevertheless, one lesson that can be learned from both examples is that the very traditional humanities method of reading handwritten texts, whether or not it is done as a DIY activity, will involve digital tools in one way or another.

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Conclusion

DIY culture is a social world of people engaging in DIY activities, which have in common that they are activities undertaken without any formal education or training. Information behaviour in DIY culture is autodidact and information sharing is informal and outside of organisational structures. Furthermore, it is rarely dependant on funding and thus has the potential to incorporate innovative solutions at a higher speed than we typically see in the humanities. This is why on the one hand it is important for the Digital Humanities to look towards DIY culture and learn from the methods and practises that occur here.

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On the other hand, the information sought, created and shared within DIY culture, both on– and offline, is a product of the human mind and can, along with more traditional cultural products, be understood by humanities scholars. The Internet is currently exploding with this material, alongside more frivolous entertainment content. If we in the humanities want to understand our current culture, now and in the future, we need to study DIY culture, both off- and online to a much higher degree than is currently the case.

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Therefore, the answer to the question whether the humanities by necessity have a digital future is two-fold. Yes, the humanities need to employ digital tools in order to understand culture and cultural products on the internet However, humanities does not have a solely digital future as culture and cultural products will continue to blossom offline and traditional humanities methods are needed in order to understand these too.

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Notes

[1] The class "IT for beginners" taught by the author took place through the community learning programme AOF in Denmark, Autumn 2013

[2] Online knitting and crochet community (www.ravelry.com/)

[3] Based on preliminary conclusions from wider empirical study of self-reported use of these autodidact information situations which the author is currently conducting.

[4] http://vto2.classics.ox.ac.uk/

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