

Tractable Tensions: A Review of Digital Humanities: Knowledge and Critique in a Digital Age by David M. Berry and Anders Fagerjord

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Abstract

This book analyzes the tensions that arise when the numerical, predictive exactitude of digital computing embraces the humanities. Such tensions *are* thrown into frequent and sharper relief, whereas the sciences proceed on the basis of skepticism, and the humanities proceed on the basis of interpretation, criticism and dialectical engagement with given issues. In addition, the pervasive nature of digital computing heightens the risk of over-shadowing the humanities. The authors argue for a critical turn in digital humanities.

Part I

A number of critics accuse digital humanities of systematically betraying the foundational principles of the humanities. Other critics say that the digital besieges the humanities, and create tension by questioning the humanities' viability, relevance, or purpose in the contemporary world. Furthermore, tensions between the digital and the humanities have led to a scenario where "the territory of digital humanities is currently under negotiation" [Svennson 2010, 173]. Reflections along similar lines have led to other assertions: that digital humanities is a discipline very much under construction, that "digital liberal arts" [Pannapacker 2013] would be a more preferable term, that the term *digital studies* should be adopted. Some maintain that the term *digital humanities* is void of meaning, preferring to call it "computational criticism" [Hackler and Kirsten 2016, 6], and others hold that digital humanities is only a certain way of doing humanities research: a computational turn in the humanities. While Sterne is content with contrasting digital humanities with analog humanities [Sterne 2015, 19], Galloway warns that "few things will cripple the humanities more than the uncritical *adoption of tools* or the continued encroachment of positivistic research methods borrowed from cognitive science, neuroscience, computer science, or elsewhere" [Galloway 2021, 257].

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By placing themselves at the boundary of computing and humanities, the authors Berry and Fagerjord examine a broad spectrum of practices, methods and inquiries that apply to digital humanities. They also discuss the impact (and limitations) of computational tools on humanities research, making the case that contemporary humanities must eventually inculcate new digital culture into its purview, in the same way that previous humanities interrogated and inculcated writing, images and the printing press. However, the epistemic yield of digital humanities, the authors argue, runs the risk of materially distorting the essence of the humanities: the digital gently morphing into a major obstacle to the humanities. They insist that failure to dwell critically upon these *tensions* would increasingly render the humanities impotent in the face of hegemonic, ubiquitous digital technology. In order to side-step the domineering tendencies of digital technology, the authors propose a form of cross-disciplinary dialectics; a *critical digital humanities* that skillfully manages the conceptual quagmires that must arise: a critical turn in digital humanities will consolidate its status in academia.

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Part II

First, critical digital humanities must avoid treating digital methodologies and computers as "truth machines" [Berry and

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Fagerjord 2017, 110], by recalling the socio-technical aspects of their design and manufacture: digital technology, after all, is not neutral in itself. Furthermore, the authors propose that technical issues in computing must never be allowed to drive research in the humanities. Such a resistive stance, they hope, will create room for the humanities to “communicate their vision of humanity to the public” [Berry and Fagerjord 2017, 114] by “helping to broaden the very idea of instrumentalism, technological and otherwise” [Berry and Fagerjord 2017, 114].

Second, they insist that the “digital itself is to be historicized” [Berry and Fagerjord 2017, 112]. Digital methods evolved as responses to certain types of problems. However, when applied to culture, the digital risks reducing culture to data, “a complete anathema to the humanities” [Berry and Fagerjord 2017, 112]. They also maintain that one must diligently engage the shadowy side of the digital, which enables global surveillance of world citizenry on a troubling scale: a shadowy side which must also be resisted. Part of this resistance involves grappling with the tendency of computational sciences to ignore matters of ethics and justice: a disastrous glorification and idolization of instrumental reason. Digital methods alone cannot determine whether “justice and freedom are better in themselves than injustice and oppression” [Horkheimer 1947, 16]. Failure in such resistance might end up making the digital humanities complicit in the problematic system of predatory capitalism and domination: a problematic system that previous humanities would have called out.

Third, the authors recommend eternal vigilance lest human society itself become victimized by uncritical digital humanities endeavours. The large datasets generated by digital humanities projects need to be guarded with utmost diligence, given that “the digital enables exploding quantities of data that are increasingly hard to contain within organizations and boundaries” [Berry and Fagerjord 2017, 113]. Citing the highly scandalous fallouts of the WikiLeaks saga, which resulted from an informational overload, the authors allude to an even earlier critique made by Horkheimer: “the physical sciences are endowed with so-called objectivity, but emptied of human content; the humanities preserve the human content, but only as ideology, at the expense of truth” [Horkheimer 1947, 52]. A critical turn in the humanities will necessarily result in a slow-down of some sort. The authors insist that such a slow-down will necessarily benefit humanity in the long run.

Part III

The key to following the argumentations in this book is to perceive digital humanities as a field “positioned between technology and culture” [Berry and Fagerjord 2017, 11]. While paging through this book, I was reminded of a fairly popular riddle among some cultures in southern Africa. The riddle has to do with the description of a zebra: whether the zebra is a white animal with black stripes, or a black animal with white stripes. In marrying humanities to digital computing, one creates a zebra-like creature, a creature whose stripes are challenging to describe at some level. An uncritical form of digital humanities will necessarily get bogged down by intractable tensions between the digital and the humanities. Similar intractable tensions arise in trying to describe the zebra’s stripes, with the additional risk of forgetting other profiles that the zebra presents to consciousness. In many ways, the authors remind the reader that any field of study is never exhausted by its particular presentation. A particular givenness does not exhaust the field; the field of study is a unity of its givennesses. One should not get so distracted by the zebra’s stripes that one loses sight of zebras’ hidden profiles. Critical digital humanities leads us to unify the digital and the humanities without making one dominate the other.

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