

Review of The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Digital Humanities (2023)

Soni Wadhwa <soni_dot_w_at_srmap_dot_edu_dot_in>, SRM University, India  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6707-7094>

Abstract

James O'Sullivan's edited volume is, to use his words, likely to attract three kinds of readers: DH-experts, DH-curious, and naysayers. This review examines what the book offers to each category of readers, as a way of approaching the Herculean task of capturing a glimpse of 43 chapters that touch upon the domain in diverse ways. The self-critical spirit consistently demonstrated across chapters will stimulate dialogue regarding the gains made by DH when analysing culture textually.

A handbook is a tricky object: it must provide an overview of a domain: articulating its first principles, mapping its present debates and trajectories, and pointing to the directions where it is likely to head. Very often, it is also likely to be judged on the basis of what it excludes, engaged with on the basis of what it has missed rather than what it includes. It is against the background of that baggage of expectations that this review approaches its subject (the volume) through the editor's own framing. James O'Sullivan, in his introduction to the handbook, clarifies that his volume was imagined as future-focused – offering reference materials and provocations to facilitate further progress in the field – and likely to be of interest to DH-experts, DH-curious, and naysayers. It is a rich collection divided into five parts: “Perspectives & Polemics”, “Methods, Tools, & Techniques”, “Public Digital Humanities”, “Institutional Contexts”, and “DH Futures”. With every part, individual chapters present overviews of subdomains while highlighting specific problems and approaches to address the same. For instance, “Methods, Tools, & Techniques” carries chapters around programming, encoding practices within textual editions, text mining, natural language processing, audio and visual data analysis, social media analysis, spatiality, data visualisation, and the importance of critical digital humanities as a praxis of digital humanities. As an independent part within the handbook, it brings together principles that guide DH praxis in the subdomains mentioned while also offering critiques of them where applicable. Thus, while the handbook cannot be rendered coherent in terms of argument, there are a few things to be said about its structure that can help readers approach it in specific ways. Let us examine what the volume does for these categories of readers rather than summarise over forty chapters spread over five parts.

Firstly, the handbook is an interesting expression of how to approach dissent and critique. Usually, such compilations offer critiques at the end, *after* one has read about different definitions, theories and approaches prevalent within a subject. James O'Sullivan has thrown this sequencing logic out of the window for part one of the book, which has “polemics” built into it. As the longest part (with 11 chapters), it engages with the question of what DH is and what it is not. Instead of clearing this opening space for providing an overview of the field, O'Sullivan piles upon it the task of critique and it is a genius move because, after all, what is an overview without critique? To understand what DH is, O'Sullivan's readers must also take into account what it is not. For instance, one chapter (Johanna Drucker's) argues that one must not take the tools for granted but develop a deeper understanding of how these tools work, failing which DH-ers would stop innovating or keep relying on tools and their output for arguments. Drucker rather that they design new tools for diverse purposes or decide how to use them for different agendas. The chapters on the “peripheries and epistemic margins”, non-Western DH, postcolonial DH, DH and race, queer DH, feminist DH, multilingual DH, and so on uncover silences and erasures within the field. Both DH-experts and DH-curious are likely to engage with this critique-next-to-definitions design of the book very well by identifying new questions to work on. Sullivan's design also helps one realise that the field is richer for this kind of embedding of polemics within itself, and it demonstrates the constant

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introspection to which the researchers in the domain are committed.

Second, the choice of contributors/chapters keeps critique an ongoing dialogue rather than something that is restricted to part one. For instance, the chapter on critical digital humanities (by David M. Berry) points out that a reliance on mathematization that tends to govern computational approaches, to, say, text mining, interferes with cultural critique and hides political questions such as those of labour or democracy. Another expression of self-critique and introspection comes from chapter 13 (by Quinn Dombrowski) on the importance of coding in DH: the insecurity brought in by a lack of proficiency in coding, or induced by those who claim DH to be a computational space, meant for the computationally fluent. Chapter 13 is an example of the fact that the DH community is not threatened by voices outside DH (such as Nan Z Da's) but by those who undermine the work done outside computational skills, without realising that the skills required to translate humanities research into programming need not involve writing elegant codes, to count as relevant. One way to make the DH space inclusive is to prioritize thinking in terms of workflows over programming. Another position, by Joanna Byszuk (chapter 15), is that scholars must clearly articulate their methodologies and processes in their publications, rather than assume readers would not make sense of them and thereby keep critical aspects of research as well-guarded secrets. Similarly, Alexandra Schofield (chapter 16) argues that reading research output in NLP gives one the impression that the first attempt at a question is the successful one; more often than not, research in DH tends to be iterative, most of which is not shared in the conventional research article style of dissemination. For more people to make sense of DH methods, the illusion of question-to-solution model should change. DH-curious readers will find such insights helpful.

Third, the idea that DH is a lot more than computation or programming finds ample expression in the pages of the handbook. DH is also about archiving, keeping scholarship open access, pursuing projects in cultural heritage, sustaining such projects within the university and the larger communities, investing in DH community building activities through documentation of pedagogies, working with print and book history and textuality in general, thinking about design, and reflecting on cultures of data and artificial intelligence. Indeed, the existence of these fields of inquiry throws text mining into stark relief: it turns out to be in a minority in the larger DH imagination. As Taylor Arnold and Lauren Tilton argue (chapter 17), consistent with the spirit of self-critique in the volume, an obsession with text mining betrays the logocentric orientation of DH, something that needs to change with rich imaginations of audio, visual, and even spatial texts within DH. Such a range of questions are likely to provide a lot of space to the naysayers about considering the impact of the discipline on questions of cultural texts, especially as can be seen in the final section on the "futures": the suggestion that terms and ideas such as datawork and ETA (exploratory text analysis rather than computational literary or textual studies) in chapter 34 or the suggestion that computing can be an aid in hermeneutic scholarship (chapter 35) unpack the ways in which DH is likely to be practised and understood in the near (and maybe the distant) future. One development to look forward to is its intersection with public humanities, opening up all knowledge to specialists and the general publics (chapter 37), in not just making knowledge available as open access but also in making it more accessible or comprehensible. Between the time the book was finished and this time of reading about it, the AI aspect of this future has already happened (chapter 42). The book covers a lot of territory as it stops at this edge between the present and the future.

James O'Sullivan's *Handbook* deserves to be read widely for its very approach to curation and conversation around a subject. Its relevance lies beyond DH. If every volume were to conceptualize its subject to include critical reflections, only articulating the backlash it has received, it would be a healthy sign of knowledge production in every domain. Perhaps, that is the greatest takeaway from the book: DH may have its naysayers but DH itself does not naysay, as it were, even to its naysayers.

Works Cited

Sullivan 2023 Sullivan, James. (ed.) (2023) *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Digital Humanities*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

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2. Introduction to the Digital Humanities Summer Institute Colloquium Special Issue, 2016, James O'Sullivan, University of Sheffield; Mary Galvin, University College Cork; Diane Jakacki, Bucknell University
3. It is time to address the Public Communication of DH, 2016, Julianne Nyhan, UCL
4. My DH Present, Past, & Future, 2022, Moya Bailey, Northwestern University
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3. Response to "The circus we deserve? A front row look at the organization of the annual academic conference for the Digital Humanities", 2022, The Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations,
4. The Technical Evolution of Vannevar Bush's Memex, 2008, Belinda Barnet, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne
5. #transform(ing)DH Writing and Research: An Autoethnography of Digital Humanities and Feminist Ethics, 2015, Moya Bailey, Northeastern University

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2. Tool criticism in practice. On methods, tools and aims of computational literary studies, 2023, J. Berenike Herrmann, Universität Bielefeld; Anne-Sophie Bories, University of Basel; Francesca Frontini, CNR - Istituto di Linguistica Computazionale A. Zampolli; Clémence Jacquot; Steffen Pielström, University of Würzburg; Simone Rebora, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz; Geoffrey Rockwell, University of Alberta; Stéfan Sinclair
3. Fading Away... The challenge of sustainability in digital studies, 2020, Christine Barats, Cerlis, University of Paris Descartes; Valérie Schafer, C²DH, University of Luxembourg; Andreas Fickers, C²DH, University of Luxembourg
4. Learning Digital Humanities in a Community of Practice: the DEAR model of Postgraduate Research Training, 2021, Francesca Benatti, The Open University; Paul Gooding, University of Glasgow; Matthew Sillence, University of East Anglia
5. Distributed reading: Literary reading in diverse environments, 2018, Tully Barnett, Flinders University



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