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Hacking the Academy

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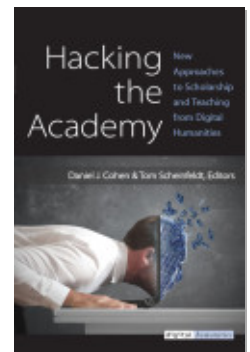
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Theory, Method, and Digital Humanities

Tom Scheinfeldt

The criticism most frequently leveled at digital humanities is what I like to call the “Where’s the beef?” question—that is, what questions does digital humanities answer that can’t be answered without it? What humanities arguments does digital humanities make?

Concern over the apparent lack of argument in digital humanities comes not only from outside our young discipline. Many practicing digital humanists are concerned about it as well. Rob Nelson of the University of Richmond’s Digital Scholarship Lab, an accomplished digital humanist, ruminated in his proposal for THATCamp (The Humanities and Technology Camp) 2010, “While there have been some projects that have been developed to present arguments, they are few, and for the most part I sense that they haven’t had a substantial impact among academics, at least in the field of history.”¹ Another post on the *Humanist* listserv (volume 124), which has covered humanities computing for over two decades, expresses one digital humanist’s “dream” of “a way of interpreting with computing that would allow arguments, real arguments, to be conducted at the micro-level and their consequences made in effect instantly visible at the macro-level.”²

These concerns are justified. Does digital humanities have to help answer questions and make arguments? Yes, of course: that’s what the humanities are all about. Is it answering lots of questions currently? Probably not: hence the reason for worry.

But this suggests another, more difficult, more nuanced question: When? When does digital humanities have to produce new arguments? Does it have to produce new arguments now? Does it have to answer questions yet?

In 1703, the great instrument maker, mathematician, and experimenter Robert Hooke died, vacating the suggestively named position he occupied for more than forty years—Curator of Experiments to the Royal Society. In

this role, it was Hooke's job to prepare public demonstrations of scientific phenomena for the Fellows' meetings. Among Hooke's standbys in these scientific performances were animal dissections, demonstrations of the air pump—made famous by Robert Boyle, but made by Hooke—and viewings of preprepared microscope slides. Part research, part icebreaker, and part theater, one important function of these performances was to entertain the wealthier Fellows of the Society, many of whom were chosen for election more for their patronage than their scientific achievements.

Upon Hooke's death, the position of Curator of Experiments passed to Francis Hauksbee, who continued Hooke's program of public demonstrations. Many of Hauksbee's demonstrations involved the "electrical machine," essentially an evacuated glass globe which was turned on an axle and to which friction—a hand, a cloth, a piece of fur—was applied to produce a static electrical charge. Invented some years earlier, Hauksbee greatly improved the device to produce ever greater charges. Perhaps his most important improvement was the addition to the globe of a small amount of mercury, which produced a glow when the machine was fired up. In an age of candlelight and on a continent of long, dark winters, the creation of a new source of artificial light was sensational and became a popular learned entertainment, not only in meetings of early scientific societies, but in aristocratic parlors across Europe. Hauksbee's machine also set off an explosion of electrical instrument making, experimentation, and descriptive work in the first half of the eighteenth century by the likes of Stephen Gray, John Theophilus Desaguliers, and Pieter van Musschenbroek.

And yet, not until later in the eighteenth century and early in the nineteenth century did Franklin, Coulomb, Volta, and ultimately Faraday provide adequate theoretical and mathematical answers to the questions of electricity raised by the electrical machine and the phenomena it produced. Only after decades of tool building, experimentation, and description were the tools sufficiently articulated, and phenomena sufficiently described for theoretical arguments to be fruitfully made.

There's a moral to this story. One of the things digital humanities shares with the sciences is a heavy reliance on instruments, on tools. Sometimes new tools are built to answer preexisting questions. Sometimes, as in the case of Hauksbee's electrical machine, new questions and answers are the byproduct of the creation of new tools. Sometimes it takes a while; in which meantime tools themselves and the whiz-bang effects they produce

must be the focus of scholarly attention. The eighteenth-century electrical machine was a parlor trick. Until it wasn't.

This kind of drawn out, *longue durée*, seasonal shifting between methodological and theoretical work isn't confined to the sciences. Growing up in the second half of the twentieth century, we are prone to think about our world in terms of ideologies, and our work in terms of theories. Late twentieth-century historical discourse was dominated by a succession of ideas and theoretical frameworks. This mirrored the broader cultural and political discourse in which our work was set. For most of the last seventy-five years of the twentieth century, socialism, fascism, existentialism, structuralism, poststructuralism, conservatism, and other ideologies vied with one another broadly in our politics, and narrowly at our academic conferences.

But it wasn't always so. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship was dominated not by big ideas, but by methodological refinement and disciplinary consolidation.

Denigrated in the later twentieth century as unworthy of serious attention by scholars, the nineteenth and early twentieth century, by contrast, took activities like philology, lexicology, and especially bibliography very seriously. Serious scholarship was concerned as much with organizing knowledge as it was with framing knowledge in a theoretical or ideological construct.

Take my subdiscipline—the history of science—as an example. Whereas the last few decades of research have been dominated by a debate over the relative merits of “constructivism”—the idea, in Jan Golinski's succinct definition in his excellent book *Making Natural Knowledge*, “that scientific knowledge is a human creation, made with available material and cultural resources, rather than simply the revelation of a natural order that is pre-given and independent of human action”—the history of science was in fact founded in an outpouring of bibliography.³ The life work of the first great American historian of science—George Sarton—was not an idea, but a journal (*Isis*), a professional society (the History of Science Society), a department (Harvard's), a primer (his *Introduction to the History of Science*), and especially a bibliography (the *Isis Cumulative Bibliography*). Tellingly, the great work of his greatest pupil, Robert K. Merton, was an idea: the younger Merton's “Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England” defined history of technology as social history for a generation. By the time Merton was writing in the 1930s, the

cultural climate had changed, and the consolidating and methodological activities of the teacher were giving way to the theoretical activities of the student.⁴

I believe we are at a similar moment of change right now—that we are entering a new phase of scholarship that will be dominated not by ideas, but once again by organizing activities, both in terms of organizing knowledge, and organizing ourselves and our work. Our difficulty in answering “where’s the beef?” stems from the fact that, as digital humanities scholars, we traffic much less in new theories than in new methods. The new technology of the Internet has shifted the work of a rapidly growing number of scholars away from thinking big thoughts to forging new tools, methods, materials, techniques, and modes, or work which will enable us to harness the still unwieldy, but obviously game-changing, information technologies now sitting on our desktops and in our pockets. These concerns touch all scholars. The Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media’s Zotero research management tool is used by more than a million people—all of them grappling with the problem of information overload. And although much of the discussion remains informal, it’s no accident that *Wikipedia* is right now one of the hottest topics for debate amongst scholars.

Perhaps most telling is the excitement that now—or really, once again—surrounds the library. The buzz among librarians these days dwarfs anything I have seen in my entire career among historians. The terms “library geek” and “sexy librarian” have gained new currency as everyone begins to recognize the potential of exciting library-centered projects like Google Books.

All of these things—collaborative encyclopedism, tool building, librarianship—fit uneasily into the standards of scholarship forged in the second half of the twentieth century. Most committees for promotion and tenure, for example, must value single authorship and the big idea more highly than collaborative work and methodological or disciplinary contribution. Even historians find it hard to internalize the fact that their own norms and values have, and will again, change over time. But change they must. In the days of George Sarton, a thorough bibliography was an achievement worthy of great respect, and an office closer to the reference desk in the library an occasion for great celebration (Sarton’s small suite in Study 189 of Harvard’s Widener Library was the epicenter of history of science in the United States for more than a quarter century). As we tumble deeper into the Internet age, I suspect it will be again.

Eventually, digital humanities must make arguments. It has to answer

questions. But yet? Like eighteenth-century natural philosophers confronted with a deluge of strange new tools like microscopes, air pumps, and electrical machines, maybe we need time to articulate our digital apparatus, to produce new phenomena that we can neither anticipate, nor explain immediately. At the very least, we need to make room for both kinds of digital humanities—the kind that seeks to make arguments and answer questions now, and the kind that builds tools and resources with questions in mind, but only in the back of its mind, and only for later.

Notes

1. Rob Nelson, “Audiences and Arguments for Digital History,” April 19, 2010, <http://chnm2010.thaticamp.org/04/19/audiences-and-arguments-for-digital-history/>.
2. *Humanist* listserv, volume 124, <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/humanist/Archives/Current/Humanist.vol24.txt>.
3. Jan Golinski, *Making Natural Knowledge: Constructivism And the History of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 6.
4. George Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science* (Philadelphia: Williams & Wilkins Company, 1931). Robert K. Merton, “Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England,” *Osiris* 4 (January 1938): 360–632.

