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Hacking the Academy

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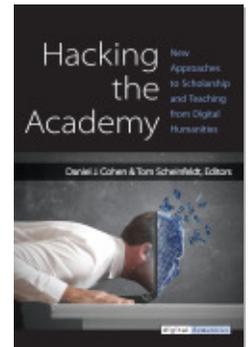
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The Trouble with Digital Culture

Tim Carmody

One of the problems with studying any medium is that it's too easy to mistake the part for the whole. Literature professors can confidently chart the development of the novel over centuries by referencing only a tiny well-regarded sliver of all novels published—some immensely popular, and others forgotten. When you turn to the broader field of print culture, books jostle against newspapers, advertisements, letters, memos, government and business forms, postcards, sheet music, reproduced images, money, business cards and nameplates, and thousands of other forms that have little if anything to do with the codex book. We tend toward influential, fractional exemplars, partly out of necessity (raised to the level of institutions) and partly out of habit (raised to the level of traditions). Yet trouble inevitably arises when we forget that the underexamined whole exists, or pretend that it doesn't matter. It always does. If nothing else, the parts that we cut out for special scrutiny draw their significance in no small part by how they relate to the other, subterranean possibilities.

The culture of digital technology, like that of print, is impressively broad, thoroughly differentiated, and ubiquitously integrated into most of our working and nonworking lives. This makes it difficult for media scholars and historians to study, just as it makes it difficult—but inevitable—for scholars to recognize how this technology has changed, is changing, and should continue to change the academy. Self-professed digital humanists—and I consider myself one—generally look at digital culture, then identify themselves and model their practices on only a sliver of the whole.

Digital culture far exceeds the World Wide Web, social networks, e-books, image archives, games, e-mail, and programming codes. It exceeds anything we see on our laptops, phones, or television screens. It even exceeds the programmers, hackers, pirates, clerics, artists, electricians, and engineers who put that code into practice, and the protocols, consoles, and infrastructure that govern and enable their use.

This is important, because digital humanists' efforts to "hack the academy" most often turn out *not* to be about replacing an established analog set of practices and institutions with new digital tools and ideas; instead, it's a battle within digital culture itself: the self-styled "punk" culture of hackers, pirates, coders, and bloggers against the office suite, the management database, the IT purchaser. Twitter vs. the university's e-mail system. These are also reductions, but potentially instructive ones.

For my own part, I tend to see digital humanism less as a matter of individual or group identity, or the application of digital tools to materials and scholarship in the humanities, but instead as something that is happening, continuing to emerge, develop, and differentiate itself, both inside and outside of the academy, as part of the spread of information and the continual redefinition of our assumptions about how we encounter media, as well as technological and other objects in the world. In this, every aspect of digital technology—whether old or new, establishment or counterestablishment—plays a part.