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Big Digital Humanities

Svensson, Patrik

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Preface

This is a book about how the humanities intersects with the digital. This engagement is richly multifaceted, intersectional, technical, critical, and hopeful. The digital can be seen as a material or a property that permeates much (but not all) of contemporary culture and society as well as the humanities as an institutional and scholarly endeavor. Humanistic questions about materiality, embodiment, prosthesis, gender, identity, privacy, space, aesthetics, and ethnicity all relate to the digital in one way or another, and such questions must shape the digital humanities. Some of these questions will necessarily be discipline-specific, while others will require joint efforts across disciplines and areas. At the same time, the humanities needs to engage with technology and maintain its critical potential when creating technological infrastructure. The technology itself is intertwined with instrumentation, methodologies, expert competence, expressions, research challenges, and analytical possibilities. Examples include map-based analyses, critical readings of databases, visualization, textual analysis, and academic installations.

The status of the digital humanities as a field has been debated for decades but now seems to have reached a certain size, level of maturity and level of visibility. At the same time, the digital humanities is still being formed, negotiated, and envisioned, which makes this a particularly good time to explore the field in depth. Disciplinary and epistemic tension exists, as do multiple possible paths forward, making this book not just a discussion of an existing field but also a far-reaching engagement with the ideational and practical shaping of that field, not in a dogmatic or exclusionary way but rather in an exploratory and inclusive fashion. This is also a book about how individual students, experts, and scholars can become involved in making the digital humanities.

One of the key challenges for the digital humanities is the integration of critical and technological engagement. For example, this requires humanists to look critically at big data as a phenomenon while considering how big data

methodology may or may not be useful to humanities research and education. This may prompt the humanities to redefine what big data is and even to develop new methodologies. The bigness of big data in the humanities may refer to the number of perspectives inherent in the material and the richness of critical inflection rather than the sheer quantity of data.

In addition, the digital humanities has also come to be seen as a site for challenging and renewing the humanities and academy. This is a controversial position open to attack on several fronts. Some of the digital humanities community would state that envisioning the future of the humanities is not what the field is about given its focus on building and on managing day-to-day project works. Some mainstream humanists would argue that the digital humanities is not a serious humanistic endeavor because it simply includes too little humanities. Others would point out that digital humanities is a top-down strategy implemented by administrators and other leaders to “help” the humanities even though many other investments would make much more sense.

At the same time, the digital humanities has actually become a place of hope, open debate, and progressive energy, with strong critical potential. There is value to the debate and frenzy surrounding the digital humanities. Early career scholars are coming to the field not just because there may be jobs there but also because it is seen as a place to engage with the future of the humanities. And what if we see the support for the digital humanities not as a way of controlling and “helping” the humanities but rather as a possible way to strengthen both the humanities and the digital humanities? I see embracing this aspect of the digital humanities as a responsibility, and we need to incorporate all of these facets in our vision of the digital humanities. I also believe that we will likely reach a decisive point for the field in the near future and that some of the choices we make over the next five years will not only decide the fate of the digital humanities but influence the future of the humanities and the academy.

This book suggests a model for the digital humanities (“big digital humanities”) that draws on the humanities; on being placed in the space between ideas and institutions; on the traditions and emerging configurations of the digital humanities; and on the coming together of intellectual and technological curiosity. Many of the pieces are already there, and I hope that this volume will help us think about what we are, where we could be going, and how we can get there.

The State of the Field

There are many indications of the contemporary reach and energy of the digital humanities as a field. One simple example is that at the end of the first week of December 2013, at least three international workshops on the field took place simultaneously. The conference Cultural Research in the Context of “Digital Humanities” in St. Petersburg, Russia, coincided with the workshop *Sorting the Digital Humanities Out* in Umeå, Sweden, and the conference (Digital) Humanities Revisited—Challenges and Opportunities in Hanover, Germany. These events demonstrate that the digital humanities also lives outside the Anglo-American sphere. The titles alone also give us a sense of the ongoing reconfiguration, and the event programs point to different directions and interests. It is also telling that the key international organization for the digital humanities, the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, did not support any of these events, even though the Hanover conference included many speakers from that community.

As these gatherings demonstrate, the digital humanities is not one thing, and although the field’s footprint has increased over the past decade, it does not incorporate everything that could be labeled *digital humanities*. Furthermore, not everyone who might be identified as doing digital humanities may want to be labeled a *digital humanist*. In this sense, the field is not a blank slate but rather a narrative or a series of narratives. As an institutional structure, the field has a predominant (and privileged) epistemic tradition that has shaped many of the institutional parameters that now configure it. This tradition, humanities computing, has a substantial investment in engaging with information technology as a tool, in privileging textual analysis and encoding, and in promoting a particular set of technologies and methodologies. These are important competencies and areas, but they are not the only ones. The recent expansion of the field, however, has challenged this structure on a number of points, which is a healthy and necessary development. For example, the perceived lack of gender, ethnic, or environmental engagement has been noted. Ideally, in intersecting with other traditions and disciplinary backgrounds, these areas will also be challenged and negotiated. For example, we see exciting development in areas such as environmental humanities and sound studies.

Given that the range of the digital humanities extends from technological instrumentation to transforming the academy, we should not be surprised

that there is no clear consensus about what it entails. When Jeffrey Schnapp announced “A Short Guide to the Digital_Humanities” in January 2013,¹ Mark Sample tweeted, “I’ve got 99 problems and the Short Guide to Digital_Humanities is about a dozen of them.”² And when discussing a definition of “digital humanities” on the same day, Ted Underwood said, “Fantasizing about a lead-walled chamber deep in stable Precambrian rock, where the term ‘Digital Humanities’ could be sealed away forever.”³ Natalia Cecire offers a different kind of argument when she problematizes the stress on “niceness” in the digital humanities and discusses the focus on building, noting the field’s “complicity with exploitative postindustrial labor practices.”⁴ These examples point to different positions, and one of the key arguments of this book is that we need to reconcile various traditions and positions without losing their substance and sharpness.

Big Digital Humanities

Big digital humanities describes a broadly defined, open, and challenging field that exists between humanities departments, disciplines, and epistemic traditions, between the humanities and other knowledge domains, and between the academy and the world outside. This position is driven by intellectual curiosity, technological imaginaries, historical sensibility, scholarly challenges, and a willingness to engage critically and technologically across issues, perspectives, and needs relevant to understanding and improving the human condition.

Big digital humanities facilitates multiple modes of engagement between the humanities and the digital, stretches across all of the humanities and outside, and functions as a platform for the humanities. According to this model, the digital humanities engages with the digital as a tool, as an object of inquiry, and as an expressive medium. These modes of engagement increasingly need to come together in intellectually driven and materially sensitive amalgams. In this way, the digital humanities can address some of the most important current and future challenges: achieving far-reaching scholarly advancement, creating a rich nonservile connection to the rest of the humanities and outside, furthering the humanities, pushing development of all the modes of engagement, and tackling some of the scholarly and methodological issues facing the humanities today.

Naturally, not all digital humanists or digital humanities initiatives will do all of these things at the same time, and a multitude of positions and

institutional realities will necessarily exist. This model is open and moves beyond the big-tent framework of the digital humanities and some of the territorial struggles. Indeed, the notion of a big tent is problematic in a number of ways, and I believe that we need to get rid of the tent altogether. Big digital humanities is not a new label, but rather a framework for envisioning and making the digital humanities. The digital humanities is seen as a liminal⁵ operation or space, placed in between, with considerable integrity. This position is easier to maintain if we do not see the digital humanities as a fully fledged discipline. At the same time, we need to be sensitive to the heterogeneity of local contexts and avoid proclaiming a one-size-fits-all model for the digital humanities.

The solution to this problem does not box us in but allows us to maintain multiple identities at the same time, respect others, be critical toward both the humanistic and the digital, and continuously renew ourselves. This solution is a broadly conceived, multifaceted, inclusive, nonterritorial, and intersectional digital humanities that can further humanities research and education, stimulate methodological and technical engagement, function as a meeting place and innovation hub, and be a place for engaging with the future of the humanities and higher education. Herein lies the bigness of big digital humanities.

The fact that the digital humanities is not very well defined can be seen as problematic in some ways, but it is also a strength. Liminal, networked operations depend on a certain degree of instability and adaptability. As outlined in this book, big digital humanities reaches across a large territory but has no precise territory of its own. The field also has a very large range, from societal challenges and the role of the humanities to the exact materiality of archival interfaces and the cultural conditions that continuously shape underlying data structures.

The Place of the Digital Humanities

The digital humanities cannot be seen in isolation from the rest of the humanities, the academy, and the planet that we inhabit. Even though the field as traditionally historicized was not institutionally stable or safe, it did have a clearer sense of institutional position and place. The increased institutional centrality of the field over the past ten years and the growing realization inside and outside the academy that the digital, broadly conceived, matters intellectually, technologically, and humanly has created pressure on the field to be

more strongly and diversely connected to the outside (humanities disciplines, the rest of the academy, so-called big challenges) than in the past. This is not to say that the field has not previously been collaborative or involved in outreach; rather, we may need a different kind of collaboration in terms of scale, quality, and questions asked.

While the digital humanities seems to have been unable to respond to some of these challenges, a great deal of development and an influx of new perspectives have undoubtedly occurred over the past decade. Not only has the digital humanities adapted to its new reality, but its interlocutors and collaborators have adapted to and interrelated with the core of the digital humanities. From the perspective that the digital humanities is a liminal place, such interactions and continuous exchanges are operationally critical.

Unsurprisingly, hurdles may prevent such rich interaction. The tendency for the humanities to look at the digital humanities in instrumental terms (as a service) is one such hurdle. Another is that since the expansion of the field in the mid-2000s, the digital humanities seems somewhat stuck between top-down perspectives emanating from the supposedly agentive role of the digital in potentially reforming the humanities and bottom-up perspectives grounded in the practice of decades of humanities computing work. While this bifurcation is obviously not strict or simple, it has contributed to the partial blocking of two important pathways for the digital humanities.

First, disciplinary perspectives have been slow to emerge as a consequence of a tendency to focus on either the large picture or on a largely technological and instrumental relation to the humanities disciplines as manifested in projects. This means that certain kinds of humanities work—in particular, traditional interpretative scholarship—has not played a major role in the development of digital humanities. A more general lack of disciplinarily driven issues and questions has also existed in the digital humanities, even in the presence of disciplinary subfields such as digital history. The overall consequence has been a weak or dissonant connection with the disciplines. This is not to say that the digital humanities should have adopted a disciplinary perspective or that the traditional disciplines should necessarily serve as role models; instead, having a rich connection between the digital humanities and the humanities disciplines is critical to both parties.

Second, the weak integration between overarching humanities perspectives, disciplinary vantage points, and humanities computing practice has resulted in a lack of intellectually and materially grounded agendas for the digital humanities. Among other things, this explains the digital humanities'

limited capacity to be an intellectual and technological partner in collaboration with areas such as environmental humanities and ethnic studies and with various university-wide and global initiatives. The digital humanities has started to move more in this direction, but such developments often remain in the relatively early stages. The 2013 discussion of “digital materialism” on the Humanist list is a good example of different worlds clashing within the expanding field of digital humanities, and Whitney Trettien’s comment manifests a certain degree of frustration: “If digital materiality is a cute oxymoron, please tell that to the noisy CPU fan that incessantly huffs hot air from my poorly thermoregulated laptop.”⁶ Trettien indirectly draws our attention to another, related perspective rarely discussed in the digital humanities: the environmental impact of the technologies used. And while Bethany Nowviskie’s characteristically thought-provoking “Digital Humanities in the Anthropocene” at the Digital Humanities 2014 conference provides a refreshing and rare perspective on the field’s place in relation to large time spans and major challenges, she still proposes strategies and a forward path largely internal to the digital humanities rather than relating to areas such as environmental humanities.⁷

The digital humanities has become a place where the humanities are made, for better or worse, and such a place requires solid intellectual, methodological, and technological engagement and outreach across the humanities, the humanities disciplines, the academy, and the public sphere. The digital humanities is not a discipline, not a big tent, not a service function, not a methodological commons. Rather, it is an inclusive meeting place for the humanities and the digital, a contact zone for a range of epistemic traditions and expert competencies, and an infrastructure for empowering participants, creating scholarship of many types, building technological solutions and methodology, and curating meaningful intellectual exchange. In this view, scholarship, education, and technology are intrinsically intertwined, whether in performing critical analysis of online learning platforms, developing tools for exploring and deconstructing historical 3-D constructions, creating alternative metadata ontologies to allow for postcolonial readings of legal documents, exploring the use of visual frames architecturally and computationally, or challenging the traditional attribution of gender in computer game history. Such work is always both humanistic and technological.

If the digital humanities is at heart a humanistic endeavor, the field has to have a sense of what it means to be part of the humanities in our time. While this question unavoidably speaks to all of the humanities, it is particularly relevant for the digital humanities, given the place and potential of the field. Da-

vid Theo Goldberg says, “I understand the power of the humanities, traditionally and today, to be an engagement in translating the human to ourselves: what it is to be, what it means and has meant to be, and what it ought to be human?”⁸ The response to such questions can never be just technological, but in an increasingly digital world, the response is fairly likely to have some kind of digital inflection. The digital humanities must work with the humanities (and other) disciplines and various intersectional areas around such questions. Many intellectual and technological partnerships can be created and strengthened through placing the digital humanities between rather than at the center or the periphery.

Understanding the place of the digital humanities also means being open to the traditions, complexity, dynamism, and innovation in the humanities. The digital part of the digital humanities seems often to be assumed to be more dynamic, progressive, and agentic than the humanities part. The assumption of the unchanging nature of the humanities is not new and was questioned as early as 1967 by Walter J. Ong, and although he writes that this assumption “hardly lingers in informed circles today,” it still seems prevalent.⁹ While some aspects of the humanities may not change very quickly and disciplinary structures may condition scholarship to a significant degree, the humanities is not static. Important findings certainly continue to emerge in the traditional disciplines, although much of this work can seem incremental and highly specialized. And while a need certainly exists for more collaborative scholarly output in the humanities and for a larger engagement with digital modalities, among other examples, it is also important to acknowledge the value of individual scholarly production and other modalities associated with the traditional humanities. Sometimes the frustration with the humanities among digital humanists and others results in calls for a full overhaul of the humanities, but it seems more productive and realistic to work with the disciplines and include them in visions of the future humanities. This is not to say that the disciplinary landscape cannot change or that old structures must prevail; rather, there is an intellectual and strategic rationale for aligning what is already there, including the intersectional work carried out under rubrics such as queer studies, critical disability studies, software studies, and sound studies.

The humanities seems more amenable to structural shifts within and outside the academy than do other domains, perhaps as a consequence of the relatively small size of the humanities and a perception that the humanities has a marginal position, at least in relation to the way higher education

has been transformed over the past two decades. In Sweden, for example, a changed allocation system since the mid-1990s has put a low value on most humanities and social science students in favor of funding to tackle certain “big challenges” (typically not at all humanities-driven), funding for “large” research environments (a few of which have been geared toward social sciences/humanities), a multiple-funding initiative to support the environmental humanities, long-term investments in gender studies, and arts-based research, and massive investments in science infrastructure (including the European Spallation Source). Overall, the size of higher education in Sweden has increased significantly over this period, but there has also been a distinct redistribution of resources and an increased focus on utilitarian, instrumental, and innovation-framed perspectives. This redistribution has clearly not benefited the humanities and the interpretative social sciences. The development of higher education has also increasingly been driven by a sense of international competition, which has made the prioritization of science, engineering, and medicine even more pronounced and has emphasized concepts such as employability and bibliometrics.¹⁰

Somewhat sadly, one of the constant factors since at least the 1970s seems to be the framing of the humanities as a domain in crisis. This framing has a very real and factual foundation, but it is also a matter of narrative, perspective, and outlook. Despite their discursive and conceptual expertise, the humanities clearly have not been able to articulate a convincing rationale and path forward. Multiple factors explain this inability, including the limitations of disciplinary thinking, a high degree of specialization, a reluctance to use humanities knowledge to change the academic lifeworld, and the positioning of the humanities as marginal and resistant to what is perceived as coming from the outside (including a neoliberal agenda and science-based models for knowledge production).

The digital humanities contributes to the development of the humanities and the academy through simultaneously challenging and being challenged by the humanities. The digital humanities as a liminal place is much more than a platform for digital studies and implementations; it is a means to articulate, further, and revitalize the humanities—not as digital humanities by itself but as a vision of the human sciences where the digital humanities can contribute to taking on the intellectual, social, and technological challenges of our time. Goldberg argues that given the new landscape of information, we need “revised modes of translating ourselves to ourselves.”¹¹ The humanities thus need to reconfigure and rethink themselves, which will take a

concerted effort, and the digital humanities has much to contribute to such an effort, as do other areas and initiatives both inside and outside the humanities. Indeed, the digital humanities needs to occupy this place to reach its scholarly, technological, and societal potential.

HUMLab as a Testing Ground

My conception of the digital humanities has been shaped through more than ten years' experience of running HUMLab at Umeå University, researching the field, visiting a large number of institutions and individuals, and taking an active part in a national and international dialogue.

This book tells the story of big digital humanities through a range of perspectives or facets that come together, many of them filtered through HUMLab as an experience and as an intersectional point for reflection, experiments, and the articulation of what digital humanities and the humanities at large can be. In this way, HUMLab has partly been a collaborative laboratory for testing ideas that led to the conception of big digital humanities as presented in this book. I have used HUMLab as a networked platform for probing, challenging, discussing, articulating, building, and making the digital humanities. This does not mean, however, that big digital humanities can only be implemented through building HUMLab-like environments at comprehensive universities; rather, experiences from building HUMLab have contributed to my understanding of big digital humanities.

Since the late 1990s, I have traveled extensively and seen many operations around the world and, more important, have had the opportunity to engage in in-depth conversations with hundreds of people interested in the humanities and information technology. Furthermore, I have carefully followed a number of international developments and have learnt from these, and I draw on a large amount empirical material. As a result, the narrative presented in this book has many kinds of contexts and elements.

Presentation of the Book

Big Digital Humanities is intended to be a central piece for establishing, discussing, and envisioning the field of digital humanities. The book proposes a comprehensive model of digital humanities that I hope will help the field move forward. This model is based on seeing the digital humanities not as an operation mostly concerned with established technology and tools but as an

endeavor making strong intellectual arguments intertwined with technological engagement. This does not mean that every digital humanist needs to code or that every coder needs to write lengthy analytical articles, but the digital humanities brings together these perspectives and traditions in such a way as to further scholarship, enhance learning, and create new academic opportunities. Big digital humanities is also about renewing the humanities and the academy. Doing so requires openness, negotiation, a willingness to learn, and curiosity. Engagement is a critical component of making big digital humanities happen.

My engagement is demonstrated through eight personal interludes interspersed throughout the book. The main argument of the book, presented in five chapters, is constructed by looking at the intersection of the humanities and the digital, exploring the field of digital humanities, identifying the central premises of big digital humanities, proposing a framework for creating academic infrastructure to support these premises, and suggesting what processes and perspectives are most important for making the digital humanities.

Structure of the Book

The first chapter introduces the digital humanities, explores the intersection of the humanities and the digital, discusses digitally inflected challenges and the role of technology, analyzes some recent statements about the field, and traces possible directions of the field.

Chapter 2 looks at the history and wider context of the digital humanities to provide a basis for a deep understanding of the current landscape of the field, epistemic commitments, and tensions. The development of the landscape is explored through engaging with contemporary debates, looking at the role of major digital humanities associations and initiatives, and suggesting that we need to think beyond big-tent digital humanities.

The third chapter presents the foundation of big digital humanities through three basic premises: the field and the humanities disciplines benefit from engaging broadly with the digital, the digital humanities needs to be a meeting place with broad humanistic and deep academic investment, and the digital humanities is well placed to be a site of engagement for all of the humanities.

Chapter 4 considers how academic infrastructure can facilitate big digital humanities and support the humanities more broadly. Infrastructure plays a key role, and it is necessary to challenge the templates suggested by science

and technology infrastructure and by the cultural heritage sector. The humanities need to engage not just in terms of building and using infrastructure but also, and equally important, in terms of conceptualizing and critiquing infrastructure.

The final chapter is about making the digital humanities and starts out from an interlude describing a day in HUMlab. Making the digital humanities is about building institutions, curating the digital humanities, empowering the humanities, and making spaces. Ultimately, the digital humanities offers a significant site for learning and knowledge building and for connecting the conceptual level with the material and technological level.