The Rhetoric of Disruption: What Are We Doing Here?

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I started out hating the title of this volume. Disruption has a special place in the mythology of my native land of Silicon Valley: Every startup promises disruptive technologies that will change the industry forever, and “Don’t think outside the box—blow up all the boxes!” is written in invisible ink on the business card of every vc on Sand Hill Road. “Why do we want to disrupt the digital humanities?” I muttered to myself. Why would we want to borrow the rhetoric and methodology of Kleiner Perkins (which was known as a hegemonic boys club long before Ellen Pao sued them)? Is the Harvard MBA Program really the place to turn for new models of innovation in humanistic inquiry? Can’t we effect change—deep, meaningful change—without adopting the language of one of the most inequitable neighborhoods of late-stage capitalism? But in the course of trying to find a place for my thoughts about community, conversation, and the digital humanities under an umbrella that is labeled disrupt, I have found my way to a new understanding of what we are doing here. What follows is an anatomy, a taxonomy, even a genealogy of the term “disrupt” and a discussion of the questions that precipitate out of each usage of the word. The emphasis on questions rather than answers is intentional and, I think, impor-
tant, for if we are to diversify the digital humanities, there must be room for multiple solutions to every problem.

But first let me take a step back and explain my disenchantment with the currently ubiquitous form of disruption, Clayton Christensen’s notion of *disruptive innovation*. Christensen is a professor of business administration at the Harvard School of Business, describing himself as the “World’s Top Management Thinker.” His webpage defines disruption as “a process by which a product or service takes root initially in simple applications at the bottom of a market and then relentlessly moves up market, eventually displacing established competitors.” Karl Ulrich, Vice Dean of Innovation at the Wharton School of Business, situates the process in the realm of discourse, noting that the chief requirement is that incumbents are unable to respond. In other words, the criterion of disruption is the silencing of competitors. This concept has been taken up eagerly by academics: The 2014 annual Educause meeting focused on the topic; Utah State University offers a prize in disruption case-study writing; institutions all across the country offer classes on disruptive innovation.

Christensen’s model of disruption emphasizes competition between producers (“eventually displacing established competitors”), but in her *New Yorker* critique of his work, Harvard’s Jill Lepore casts new light on the disruptive component. Drawing on the *New York Times*’s “2014 Innovation Report,” Lepore summarizes disruptive innovation as making “cheaper and inferior alternatives” that create new markets and make old markets irrelevant. The cheaper, lower-quality products may catch our immediate attention, but at least as important, and possibly more so, is the shift from displacing producers (Christensen’s definition) to displacing consumers (the *Times*’s). In other words, disruption uses new products as the pretext for a change.

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in business models, a change that frequently leaves users worse off. At the same time that it is creative, it is inherently destruc-
tive: It does away with better products and the market for them and caters instead to consumers who didn’t need the product until they were constituted as a new market. If that is what we practice in the digital humanities, we should rethink our goals. I am uninterested in disrupting DH by doing cut-rate low-quality research in order to reach new audiences at the direct expense of old audiences (i.e., our scholarly peers).

Luckily, that is not the only model of disruption available to us. The word “disruption” (from dis-, “apart, asunder,” and rumpere, “to burst or break”) has gone through several phases of meaning since its adoption into the English language, and each of these phases has the potential to tell us something about the digital humanities and about ourselves. The earliest definition is the one that Christensen roots his concepts in: disruption as destruction and disintegration. The 19th century introduced a new definition: disruption as misbehavior. Both of these definitions are inadequate to our brief here, however. I propose that, instead, we are practicing what the biologist Hugh Cott termed “disruptive coloration”: using high contrast and difference, counterintuitively, to emphasize unity and preserve the organism. The takeaway message from all this etymological microscopy is that we not just should but must scrutinize our rhetoric, for it sets the boundaries of what DH is in the world.

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**DISRUPT:** verb, *intrans.* To burst asunder; to break into pieces, shatter; to disintegrate. 1657, R. Tomlinson, *Pharmaceutical Shop:* “Almonds may be agitated over a slow fire, till the Involucrum disrupt.”

I include a full definition here to draw attention to what I see as the most salient feature of the earliest form of disruption in English, namely, that it is an intransitive verb, like “disintegrate.” It

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does not take a direct object; it is a process internal to the organism, rather than a process that is done to it by an external agent. The skin of the almond disrupts itself. It disintegrates, with no clearly implied actor. The intransitivity of disruption is interesting not only because it removes the question of an outside agent. It also emphasizes the coherence of the thing: until disruption, there is a unified object, an entity, an organism. This, then, is a critical question when we set about to disrupt the digital humanities: To what extent is DH a single entity?

One of the principles behind this volume is that not all the members of the DH community agree on that extent. We have only to look at Stephen Ramsay’s definitions of DH1 and DH2 for a perfect illustration of this. Ramsay explored a divide that most of us in the digital humanities have long been aware of, and he names the sides, using the regrettable metaphor of diabetes: Type 1 Digital Humanities is made of up of coders, and to his way of thinking it is a community gathered around a shared set of tools rather than shared objects of study. Type 2 Digital Humanities is definitively not part of this community, and Ramsay suggests that it does not form a community at all. For Ramsay, DH2 is best described as humanistic inquiry that in some way relates to the digital — it can be media studies, it can be digital art, it can be cultural criticism, it can be digital pedagogy. I don’t agree with Ramsay’s timeline: He sees DH2 as arising well after the coinage of the term “digital humanities” (which he dates to 2003), whereas Vannevar Bush, Ted Nelson, Katherine Hayles, and George Landow would surely argue otherwise. But when he describes the relationship between DH1 and DH2 as an “ideological war,” it is not just a battle over who owns the digital humanities; it is an argument over the extent to which coders and critics are engaged in the same endeavor.

Coders vs. critics (which we may also think of as tools vs. topics) is only one divide in the digital humanities. The terrain is striated with fissures, including gender, ability, race, and the assorted intersectionalities that are realized when fissures inevitably bisect each other. Paradoxically, these fissures stand out all the more starkly when the digital humanists on one side of the divide aren’t even aware of the split. The first step toward disrupting the digital humanities is to recognize that DH is already (and perhaps always-already) a fractured community at best, and that it is sometimes hard to discern whether it is drawn together by shared inquiry (encompassing both tools and topics) or merely by competing for the same resources. I take it as a given that the self-proclaimed practitioners of digital humanities do not agree—not on what the fissures are, not on which fissure is most in need of attention, and not on whether DH is a single entity in the first place.

Given this portrait, the digital humanities does seem to be on the brink of dissolution and disintegration—disruption in the earliest historical sense of the word. But at the same time, it seems clear that few of us actually want the digital humanities to break apart into its constituent factions. DH1 may criticize DH2 for not being able to make anything (harking back to Ramsay’s now-retracted claim that “If you’re not making anything, you’re not a digital humanist”) but it has belatedly developed an interest in theory after all. DH2 has argued from the start that critique is intertwined with creation, rather than giving up and creating a separate discipline. As Adeline Koh puts it in her critique of the implied social contract of the digital humanities, “yack is already present in hack,” referring to the hack/yack distinction that sometimes distills DH1 vs. DH2. Meanwhile, digital human-

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8 Matthew Kirschenbaum (@mkirschenbaum), Twitter post, “While we’re acknowledging writing theory as making stuff, can we also acknowledge making stuff as doing theory?” 4 January 2013, 2:33 p.m.
ists of color demand recognition and respect from white digital humanists, who are usually happy to give it— as long as they don’t have to change anything. Admittedly, some (or most, or all, depending on whom you ask) of the glue that keeps the digital humanities together is resources. With institutions like the NEH Office of Digital Humanities and the DH centers (and jobs) that are springing up at universities around the world, remaining part of the DH community means access to grants, fellowships, and above all scholarly attention. But in the fervency of marginalized groups’ fight for recognition, I see more than just a demand for resources: I see a demand for a place at the intellectual table where important claims are made. I see a discipline.

It is worth noting that while I have pointed out a few fissures here (DH1 vs DH2, race, and so on), these are not the only ones. There are surely even major divisions in the digital humanities that I am unaware of. One shared feature in most of the cases, however, is that one side of the divide feels slighted and disrespected, while the other— when it gives any thought to the divide at all— feels unfairly demonized. In other words, they all call out a situation where power (in whatever form it takes) is not distributed equitably. This is also the point at which we should remind ourselves that such inequities, and the conditions that they engender, are rarely attributable to individual action or an intent to oppress. As we know, these inequities are systemic and can coexist with an entire population of well-intentioned participants. None of this is news, but again, by articulating them as part of our rhetoric, we call them out as a crucial aspect of the digital humanities.

**DISRUPTIVE DISCHARGE: noun.** a sudden, increased flow of electrical current due to the complete failure of the insulating material under electrostatic stress.¹⁰

Disruptive discharge is what occurs when the electrical charge of a source is greater than the resistance of the insulation around

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it—so great that the insulating ability breaks down, or disintegrates, and the electricity is discharged. Lightning is a good example: The electricity stays in the storm cloud until it overwhelms the air’s power to insulate, at which point a bolt of lightning strikes the ground (or another cloud). The insulation *disrupts* in the original sense of the word. Disruptive discharge was proven by Benjamin Franklin in his 1752 kite experiment,\(^\text{11}\) and the term may have been coined by Michael Faraday for his presentation to the Royal Society in 1838.\(^\text{12}\)

Disruptive discharge is an apt metaphor for the role of rhetoric in fractured discourse communities (and no matter how one views the existence of community in the digital humanities, DH certainly forms a discourse community). Crucially, electricity is governed, or even defined, by inequity: In the example of lightning, the inequity between the negative ions of the storm cloud and the positive ions of the ground overwhelms the insulating power of the air between them, resulting in a lightning bolt. If we replace the cloud and the ground with the two sides of any fissure in DH (whether DH1/DH2, gender, global north vs. global south, etc.), the inequities can result in disruptive discharges with the power to destroy. Only rhetoric—the ability and intent to persuade—insulates and prevents shocks, and it frequently breaks down.

If we are to control language’s ability to both focus and diffuse violence, we must understand it, and that means being able to describe it. And while we have many adjectives to describe language that channels hostility, there is a paucity (if not a nullity) of terms to describe language that promotes peace. Nearly all of the most common adjectives for constructive social rhetoric are problematic, and that is symptomatic of the problem, proof of the incommensurability of the two sides of a social divide.

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• *Civility* is the word most frequently deployed, but scholars were critiquing the term for decades before the Steven Salaita/Phyllis Wise case turned it into a tinderbox word. As early as 1939, Norbert Elias observed that civility is the means by which we distinguish between Us and Them. Building on Jai Sen’s equation of civility with oppression, Joan W. Scott points out in her recent anatomy of the term that “the watchword of [Western society’s] colonizing movement is ‘civility’”\(^\text{13}\). This connection of civility with colonialism carries us directly back to early Rome, where a *civis* was a citizen, fully endowed with legal rights, and a *colonia* was an outpost established to control a barbaric local population. The alternative to civility is barbarism (and it is worth noting that the term “barbaric” derives from “to stammer or speak badly”). In other words, “the dissident claims of minority groups” — claims that are by definition badly expressed — are automatically classified as unorthodox and therefore as uncivil.\(^\text{14}\) This understanding of civility certainly accords with the way it is deployed in our post-Salaita era.

• *Courteous* is another possibility one hears mentioned in discussions of rhetoric, but in many ways it is as problematic as “civility.” In his essay “From Civilitas to Civility,” John Gillingham notes that the notion of civility arose in opposition to courtesy, understood in the Early Modern period as the code of behavior appropriate to a royal court. As Gillingham describes it (although he takes issue with the periodization), civility taught people — certain kinds of people — how to be virtuous members of society, whereas courtesy taught them to be subjects. In that sense, civility is something of an improvement. But the people interpellated into this system are still those who fit the hegemonic ideal in terms of race, class, religion, sexuality, and so forth. In other words, civility shift-

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ed the locus from court to city, but the organizational principle remained a seat of governmental hierarchy.

- The same holds true for a third option, polite, which traces its roots back to the Greek *polis*. Again, the city is the dominant paradigm for nonviolent interactions with others. Even for those living on farms and in convents, the city is a cornerstone of their construction as rhetorical subjects. Politeness is particularly connected with the 18th century and the public sphere, as documented—and critiqued—by Lawrence Klein, David Alvarez, J.G.A. Pocock, and others. The standards of politeness articulated by Joseph Addison, the Earl of Shaftesbury, and Adam Smith were an effort to contain social instability and dictate behavioral norms that extended beyond court to cover the middle and gentry classes. Pocock writes, “Commerce was the parent of politeness”—and anyone without a stake in the world of commerce was likewise excluded from the possibility of polite behavior.¹⁵ Like civility, politeness was created in order to support existing power structures.¹⁶

All three of these frequently used terms—“civil,” “courteous,” and “polite”—define acceptable language as that which aligns with and advances the interests of the locus of power. This holds for *collegial* as well, a term that has been thoroughly examined and excoriated by the academic media for some time.¹⁷ These words are all unacceptable because they privilege the needs of the hegemon over, and sometimes at the expense of, those of the margin. Other terms—*friendly, agreeable, pleasant*—are mis-

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¹⁵ Ibid.
leading and/or out of line. Nice has the additional baggage of having originally meant “imbecilic” or “silly.”

So what are we to call the language that we require in order to have productive conversations across ideological and other divides? We need to think about what we want our language to accomplish and move on from there. “Constructive” will do in a pinch, as perhaps might “language of respect” — although “respectful” has too much of the schoolroom about it and is altogether too Oliver Twist-y. I have no firm answers here. But I am convinced that until we can settle on adjectives that give a true description of the language of fruitful discussion rather than ones that reduplicate social inequities, the potential for disruptive discharge — rhetoric as destruction — will loom over all of our encounters.

**DISRUPT: verb, intrans. To throw into disorder; to misbehave.** 1994, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition: “312.9: Disruptive Behavior Disorders, Not Otherwise Specified.”*\(^{18}\)

I wasn’t a troublemaker in grade school, but I lived in fear that my teacher would put an X next to the line on my report card that read “Disrupts class and distracts others.” Back then, that was seen as a sign of plain old badness, but we know now that children disrupt class when their needs aren’t being met. Almost by definition, then, disruption occurs on the margins. Thus it is no surprise that the first reference I can locate to disruption as misbehavior is in Tennyson’s “Guinevere” (part of the first installment of *Idylls of the King*, published in 1859). It concerns the disruption of the Round Table by Modred, the ultimate outsider, and Tennyson goes so far as to attribute this disruption ultimately to Guinevere and her efforts toward self-fulfillment.\(^{19}\)

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18 One of the best examinations of collegiality can be found at: Dr. Crazy, “What Does It Mean to Be Collegial? What Constitutes Civility? And How Do We Promote These Things?” Reassigned Time 2.0 (blog), 19 June 2012.

The flower of (white, male, aristocratic) chivalry is brought down by a woman and a low-born bastard.

If we are disrupting the digital humanities, is it because needs are not being met? Certainly. Every essay in this volume is a witness to a lack — of attention, of respect, of resources — for work that is marginalized by dint of geography, ethnicity, methodology, and so forth. This book would not exist if its editors had not felt that important DH projects are being overlooked and critical methodologies neglected. But I’m not entirely comfortable with the misbehavior model, because it constitutes the disruptor as ill at best, and at worst a bad egg. The subalterns of DH (however they/we are defined, or define themselves) are in no way sick, nor are they pointlessly obstreperous. We play into the status quo if we accept the portraiture implied by “disruptive behavior.”

Here I’d like to pursue a tangent that very much relates to the rhetoric of the margin and how it makes its needs known: the gerund. In case you’ve forgotten those seventh-grade grammar drills, a gerund is a verb used as a noun — “Seeing is believing.” “Thanks for asking.” “Parting is such sweet sorrow.” Gerunds have always been with us, of course, but over the last few years, they have played a special role in the margin’s talking back to the mainstream. I speak here of the terms “tone-policing,” “slut-shaming,” and “mansplaining.” They are also used as conjugatable verbs (i.e., “He tone-policed him”), but they appear far more often as gerunds — and this is no coincidence. As gerunds, they assert that THIS IS A THING. The gerund form argues back against the frequently made claim that the offense was accidental, a mere slip of the tongue. No, the gerund insists: That is a common speech pattern that needs to be called out.

And the speech pattern called out by “tone-policing,” “slut-shaming,” and “mansplaining” is the covert critique of rhetoric masquerading as engagement with the speaker’s ideas. A classic example of tone-policing is asking an interlocutor “Why must you be so hostile? It’s impossible to have a conversation with someone with such anger.” Slut-shaming, in the words of Duhaime’s Legal Dictionary, is “The judgment objectifying and passed on the sexuality of woman […] that her choice of ap-
parel is indicative of consent if not encouragement to sexual intimacy.” 20 Finally, mansplaining is a patronizing and masculinist style of explanation, typified in Rebecca Solnit’s classic essay “Men Explain Things to Me.” 21 All three of these specifically concern rhetoric, although they may not at first appear to. Tone-policing, for example, is often understood as attacking the level of emotion in a discussion, while slut-shaming would seem to be about sexuality. But in both cases, the issue is the expression of those elements, rather than their existence. Tone-policing decries emotional rhetoric, slut-shaming decries the visual rhetoric with which a woman expresses herself, and mansplaining decries a rhetoric of disrespect. All three conclusively derail discussion, and they testify to language’s power to wreak broadscale harm.

These rhetorical derailments aren’t the sole property of the mainstream. The margin practices tone-policing too—often by deploying phrases like “precious fee-fees.” Accusations of emotionality can be wielded by anyone, which serves as a reminder that it is nearly impossible to call out these behaviors without practicing them oneself. The only way to bring attention to someone’s critique of rhetoric at the expense of content is… to critique their rhetoric. Perhaps because of the Enlightenment’s downplaying of rhetoric, we do not have a valid and rigorous standard for criticizing not ideas but the expression of those ideas, but we desperately need one. By making rhetoric off-limits for discussion, we claim that it cannot affect us, but we are surrounded by evidence to the contrary. Without a viable means to bring rhetoric into the realm of critique, our conversations are permanently at risk of being shut down by uncommunicable emotion.

We also need to think about the extent to which emotion should have a voice in our scholarly discourse. As I mentioned

20 Baron Alfred Tennyson, *Tennyson’s Guinevere and Other Poems* (Glasgow: Blackie & Sons, 1923), 8.
above, the mainstream frequently targets marginal voices for expressing frustration and anger, while the margin can often be found denying mainstream voices the right to their emotions. Both of these urges seem predicated on the assumption that one’s feelings are entirely controllable and subject to rational decision-making, but this cannot be the case. If emotions aren’t fully under logical control, to what degree is it fair (or productive) to criticize someone for having them? Negative emotions, like classroom disruption, arise when needs are not being met, and the more diverse an environment, the more likely it is that needs will be ignored and strong feelings will be provoked. Sara Ahmed suggests in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and elsewhere that emotions—particularly negative ones—are analogous to and products of social inequality, oppression, and violence. As we work to restructure discourse in an inclusive world, we must give serious thought to the role emotion should play in the realm of academic discourse.

Part of the problem, or at least associated with it, is the fact that too often the mainstream thinks that persuasion is the only reason we express ourselves. A primary mode of expression by scholars speaking from the fringes of DH is affirmation and coalition-building—which the mainstream critiques as “preaching to the choir” and therefore pointless. I learned this lesson abruptly and memorably, when I wielded this churchy phrase in a discussion of diversity and was rightly called on it. The affirmation mode might be pointless to those who see themselves as officiants, or at least standing in the chancel. But for those minority voices scattered across the nave, speaking to find each other and to ascertain their shared perspective can be far more important than speaking to persuade. The derogatory term “slacktivism” is often thrown at people who use Twitter and other social media to locate fellow thinkers, affirm community, and boost each other’s signals, and this term crystallizes for me the communicative moat that separates mainstream and margin. Hegemony only needs one reason to speak, and rhetoric, historically rooted in and only in persuasion, is inherently hegemonic. Until we all acknowledge and respect multiple modes
of expression, we are fated to talk past one another in at least some of our exchanges.

**DISRUPTIVE COLORATION: noun. A pattern of coloration that breaks up the shape and destroys the outline of an object, hindering detection.**

So far, this essay seems like a series of laments about the rhetorical pickle we have gotten ourselves in and near-impossible challenges for getting out of said pickle—all structured around the word “disrupt.” But that word offers hope too, or so it seems to me, in the form of disruptive coloration. This is a form of camouflage in which something (plant, animal, ship) does not try to conform itself to the environment but instead develops sharp color contrasts, in order to disguise its silhouette. There are many examples in nature; the herd of zebras is perhaps most iconic. The predator recognizes their presence, but in the absence of distinguishable silhouettes, it cannot tell how many zebras are present or which is the best target for attack—“to break up the outline and destroy identity,” in the words of Peter Forbes.23 (Here Forbes is using “identity” in the sense of individuality—a meaning closely related to the more familiar notion of identity as that aspect of ourselves that sets us apart or against the larger group.) Disruptive coloration was first identified by artist and zoologist Abbot Thayer, and beginning with the Spanish Civil War, Thayer and those influenced by him developed the artificial equivalent, razzle-dazzle camouflage. Although it is sometimes used for planes, razzle-dazzle camouflage is most often applied to ships, to achieve three purposes: to minimize detection at a distance; to obscure the identification of the ship

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type and particularly its artillery; and to render masts invisible and thus make gunnery range-finding nearly impossible.24

This divagation into the history of camouflage is more than whimsy. In it, I find a useful model for how the fractured constituencies of the digital humanities can abide without abandoning their differences. Camouflage is a form of self-protection, and while I don’t think DH is being stalked by lions or U-boats, it does seem to me very much in danger: in danger of disruption in its earliest sense, in danger of falling to pieces. Thus I propose that we camouflage ourselves with disruptive coloration. Let us play up our contrasts in order to simultaneously disguise and preserve the unity of the whole.

Do not mistake this for a can’t-we-all-get-along plea or a call to flood onto the great DH dance floor and be excellent dancers to one another. “Can’t we all get along?” is too often the voice of power pressuring the grumpy outsiders to hush up and assimilate. Enculturation and assimilation are, if anything, the enemy that disruptive coloration protects us from. Deep down, I suspect, most of us want everyone else in the discipline to agree with us and to share our intellectual priorities and commitments — but we know that ain’t never gonna happen. This is perhaps the very definition of a postlapsarian world. Thoughtful, honest engagement with rhetoric — rhetorospection, if you will — will not solve all the problems in the postlapsarian digital humanities, but it is and must be the first step. By our rhetoric, you will know us, and by our rhetoric we will become ourselves.

24 Peter Forbes, Dazzled and Deceived: Mimicry and Camouflage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 97.
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