

Flow 2012 Conference Roundtable Panel

Media Studies and the Digital Humanities Movement

Response Statement

Dan Leopard, Associate Professor
Media Studies and Communication
Saint Mary's College of California, USA

I bring to the roundtable the history of interdisciplinary scholarship in the arts, humanities, and interpretative social sciences (collaborative work that extends back at least a century) and the view that these practices anticipate and, in some ways, prefigure many of the concerns that currently define the digital humanities (at least in some of its configurations). These early forms of expanded scholarship can be thought to include ethnographic film and media ethnography, time and generative arts, the educational turn in creative art practice (such as the performative lectures of Joseph Beuys and Andrea Fraser), the art and technology movement, and the cybernetic and pragmatic approaches to theory and methodology within the academic fields of communication and education. These last two fields of study represent distinctly composite disciplines and are structured to a great extent around internal tensions as to the methods that should serve as benchmarks for exemplary scholarship. Nevertheless, dialogue across the methodological divide that shapes the uneasy *détente* between humanistic and social science approaches (or qualitative and quantitative approaches within the social science emphasis) does happen and collaboration takes place. All of these collaborative practices suggest models for ways in which scholars (and makers or builders) can engage in fruitful forms of academic work that incorporate sophisticated theoretical reflection with rigorous methodology and empirical evidence.

It seems that much of the work in the digital humanities comes out of English departments (as critical theory and cultural studies found a home there in earlier decades), but it is troubling that certain strains of this new endeavor seems to repeat earlier battles within disciplinarily cognate fields – in this case, media and cultural studies and mass communication. I'll take Adorno over Lazarsfeld any day – critical communication theory over administrative research as well – but it seems that this binary disciplinary structuring, artificial as it may be at some level, is being replayed in digital humanities discussions around code and theory and around textual versus numerical analysis. This is not to say that each generation of scholars needn't reopen the old wounds or recast the moment in their own image, but it is to say that a bit of historical framing is essential to the debate. It is astonishing that the acolytes of quantitative research in relation to art and literature – Manovich and Moretti to name two recent scholars on this front – should declare a breakthrough by discovering what is called in the social sciences (and history and media studies) content analysis. Especially, without truly crediting the strong humanities-based critique that has developed in response to this type of quantitative accounting around content – Adorno is a point of reference here, but there are many other writers and scholars who have called number-crunching research to task.

Another point of clarity that can be gained by looking at digital humanities through the lens of media studies is the troubling assertion around the primacy of code (whatever level of fluency is suggested as a key to entering the inner circle of the field of digital humanities). While a generalized notion of practice, or building or making, is routinely understood to be of importance to media studies in its scholarly incarnations, it is also assumed that an understanding of making at a merely introductory level is sufficient preparation for exploring critically the social, cultural, aesthetic, and historical contexts of a given cultural object. As in film studies, with its requirement to study filmmaking (albeit briefly in an introductory course), it is rarely seen as necessary to study the photo-chemical processes at the level of the practicing chemist to gain entrance to critical inquiry focusing on movies or television. I understand that since the digital humanities arises from a language oriented discipline that there is an unconscious desire to replace those things that are lost – mastery of French or German – with a new form of language acquisition, computer code (or is it machine code?), but this too seems to reify one aspect of digital media while ignoring the long history of critical debate within the humanities and the social sciences over technology and its relationship to creative/critical practice.