Computation and the Humanities: towards an Oral History of Digital Humanities

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Author: Julianne Nyhan
Andrew Flynn

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Reviewer: Christina Kamposiori

Over the past years, there has been a lot of debate around the nature of scholarship in the area of Humanities Computing or, more recently, Digital Humanities (DH); more specifically, there have been several attempts to define it and identify its disciplinary characteristics.⁽¹⁾ Despite disagreements in terms of its definition, though, the field has now reached a stage where it is being increasingly institutionalised, with centres and practitioners all over the world and courses teaching some of its core principles and methods.

Yet, even though DH-related scholarship has been practiced since the mid-20th century, only recently has interest focussed on the history of the subject, important events or principal figures. As the authors of the book *Computation and the Humanities: Towards an Oral History of Digital Humanities* argue, we still know very little about the origins of the field:

‘Indeed, our understanding of the history of the field can, at the present time, be best described as a shattered mosaic of uncertain but intricate design.’ (p. 10)

We are informed that documenting the history of DH is an essential part of understanding its diversity and reach as well as how it might progress in the future; besides, recording and studying key moments from the past has been a long established practice in other academic areas, such as the History of Science. Considering the above points, this is a good time for retrospection on the development of the field and the achievements of its founding members, as well as the challenges they met.

However, in the first chapter, it is clearly argued that given the complexities involved in defining the field - including its inherently interdisciplinary nature, different scholarly attitudes and international character - it may be more appropriate to think of ‘histories’ rather than ‘a history’ of DH. At this point, it should be mentioned that this book is based on work done for the project ‘[Hidden Histories: Computing and the Humanities](#) [2]’. The project focuses on how computing technologies have been applied to humanistic work since 1949 through collecting evidence that demonstrate the context within which early Humanities

Computing research was conducted.

In this engaging book, the authors use some of the oral history material they collected – more specifically, 14 interviews – as the basis to communicate matters around the emergence of the field and its identity. Each of the interviews constitutes a chapter in the book while an introductory section (chapter one) presents some of the main issues around the history of the field, such as its transition from Humanities Computing to DH, its disciplinary traits as well as the reasons that make the study of its past a difficult task.

Apart from this contextual information, some of the methodological decisions made for the purposes of collecting and presenting the oral history material are also explained. In particular the authors discuss the approach they followed for selecting participants and conducting the interviews; choosing people from different backgrounds, including both well-known scholars and ‘outsiders’, was considered the most suitable strategy for exploring the story of a scholarly community like DH which encompasses different areas of study and practice. Thus this book features interviews with a group of early-DH scholars and practitioners in relevant positions in academia, ‘service roles’ (e.g. IT support) as well as important organisations which supported DH work.

This is indeed an approach which offers as a wide perspective of the circumstances of early DH scholarship as possible. By learning about the background and personal experiences of some of the first DH scholars and practitioners, the reader can get a rich insight not only into the academic, but also the industrial and cultural environment which shaped early research practice in the field. On the other hand, documenting the hidden histories of such an international and diverse community has its own unique challenges for the researcher/interviewer; for instance, barriers around language and dilemmas regarding the choice of participants seem inevitable.

Although the authors address some of these issues in the introduction, it would have been interesting to have a more detailed account of the ‘journey’ towards the selection of participants (especially the lesser known figures) which, in turn, could answer questions that sometimes arise while reading the interviews, such as how the interviewees were identified and what the connections between them were. This type of information could have been useful to readers who are not very familiar with the early history of the field or do not have a background in textual scholarship, which constituted the prevalent application area for DH methods at the time. Yet it should be noted that the annotations and references added to the interviews are a useful tool for those who will need more information about certain events, projects or people mentioned in the book.

Chapter two looks at the importance of oral history for studying communities and provides a brief background on the history of the field. More specifically, we are informed about the theoretical and practical tradition that the field follows in the UK. From early on, and in contrast to their US colleagues, oral historians in the UK focused on documenting the stories not only of the elite members of the society, but also of those whose stories had been overlooked or neglected. As part of this tradition, oral history has frequently been used to uncover the stories of communities, including professional and academic societies - some pertinent examples of which are mentioned in this section.

Oral history offers a more democratic approach towards the reconstruction of a community’s past by using the voices of its members; this constitutes its strength as a method despite any limitations or concerns often expressed by traditional historians about the reliability of the individual narratives or issues of subjectivity and bias. As the authors argue:

‘Instead the differing personal narratives and varying memories offer unrivalled opportunities to explore and understand communities and their relationship to the past; something that would simply not be possible when relying on other more traditional text-based historical sources.’ (p. 22)

During the relevant discussion in the book, it becomes evident that oral history as a method is well suited to

the study of a diverse academic and professional community such as DH, where archival evidence is scarce, its development ongoing and its 'histories' largely untold. Additionally, the productive comparison made here between the field of oral history and DH as an area of scholarship seem to increase the applicability of the former as a method to better understand the latter. According to the authors, the transformative impact of technology, the democratic approach to scholarship and the criticism that members of both communities have at times received are some commonly shared characteristics between the two fields. Overall, this is a helpful chapter which, along with the first one, prepares the reader to engage more fruitfully with the interview material.

In chapters three to 16 we have the opportunity to read the first-hand accounts of scholars and professionals from countries in Europe, Australia and the US who took part in or supported some of the early Humanities Computing projects and, to some extent, were responsible for the emergence of the field. Each interview begins with a useful abstract which summarises the main points of the conversation. Through these interviews, the reader will get unique insights into the history of the computer and its early industrial and academic applications, the relationship that these scholars and practitioners had with technology as well as their professional, personal and intellectual struggles. Moreover, given the goal of the project and the interests of the authors, issues around the development of the early DH community, its supporters and critics as well as matters related to identity and gender are regularly discussed during the interviews.

Regardless of the personal and professional backgrounds, though, what strikes the reader most while engaging with these accounts is the innovative and often entrepreneurial spirit that all of these scholars and practitioners shared. In fact, it is fascinating to observe how those working in the intersection of Humanities and Computing in the early years of the field were not only pushing the boundaries of traditional scholarship, but also actively contributing to the economy through creative collaborations with people in the industry and inventions that advanced the technology of the time. In this material, there is undisputable evidence of the importance of the Arts and Humanities and the role its disciplines can play in society. Today, when Arts and Humanities and Cultural Heritage-related disciplines are constantly challenged to prove their worth, it is of great value to have this material available for everyone to read.

Following the interviews, chapter 17 offers an analysis of the themes of the 'underdog' and the 'revolutionary' which were identified as part of a shared narrative between several interviewees. Shared narratives, including myths and legends, are an important cultural characteristic of academic and professional communities. According to Becher (2), they constitute part of 'the [Bourdieu's] "cultural capital", which one inherits in acquiring the membership of a disciplinary community'. (3) Through the use of literature from the history of the academic disciplines, the field of oral history and relevant DH publications, this section looks at how these two concepts came to constitute part of the foundation myth of the DH community.

More specifically, it explores how the experiences of marginalisation, often shared by the interviewees, led to the cultivation of a spirit of solidarity amongst members of the early DH community which, in turn, has contributed to today's view of DH as a 'friendly' discipline. However, given the limited archival material and the fact that not all of the participants reported similar experiences, it is suggested that more research should be conducted in order to enhance our understanding of this aspect of early DH scholarship. On the other hand, the 'revolutionary' quality that is often attributed to DH research is presented as a characteristic that both unites and provokes. The authors researched occurrences of the term 'revolution' across relevant DH publications and provided an informative account of their findings. The reader will be able to learn about how this term became part of the development of a shared identity, the factors that may have contributed to the notion of DH as a 'revolutionary' disciplinary (e.g. the role of technology) as well as the reasons why it has constituted a source of criticism.

The discussion in this chapter offers plenty of food for thought. For example, an issue that becomes apparent while reading the analysis of the term 'revolution' is that it is very little used in relation to teaching and education. Is it because the journals reviewed for this purpose publish papers mostly related to

research/professional practice in DH or have digital technologies not had the same ‘revolutionary’ effect in teaching and, accordingly, what does this mean for the discipline? Yet, as the authors argue, this section offers only a brief exploration of the themes of the ‘underdog’ and the ‘revolutionary’ and there are several aspects of these that need additional study. Thus the end of this chapter as well as chapter 18 comprise directions for further research and pertinent questions about the future of DH, including helpful suggestions for additional themes to explore based on the data presented in this book.

To conclude, the content of this book has the potential to inspire future research and be (re-)used in different contexts to foster our understanding not only of the history of the field but also of aspects of the early era of computing. The fact that this is an open access publication increases the possibility of reaching a broader audience and, thus, achieving wider impact. Furthermore, by providing content in different formats and allowing for different modes of engagement with the material, this book will appeal to different reader types and constitute a useful resource for teaching; for instance, one can read the chapters sequentially as a pdf or epub, focus on specific sections and download them separately or read them online, or choose to complement text with audio (the [recordings](#) [3]) for immersive reading. Finally, it is worth mentioning that, as this constitutes part of a larger initiative, more interviews are planned with key figures in other areas of DH, such as the cultural heritage sector (for examples see the [project's website](#) [3]). These, along with the ‘hidden histories’ uncovered here, will significantly contribute towards filling the archival gaps and extending our knowledge in the area.

Notes

1. For key readings on this topic see *Defining digital humanities: A reader*, ed. M. Terras, J. Nyhan and E. Vanhoutte (Burlington, 2013). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. T. Becher, ‘Academic disciplines’, in *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines* (Milton Keynes, 1989), pp. 19-35. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. P. Bourdieu, ‘The forms of capital’, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (Westport, CT, 1986), pp. 241-58. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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