

# The Digital Humanities is not about Building, it's about Sharing

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Every scholarly community has its disagreements, its tensions, its divides. One tension in the digital humanities that has received considerable attention is between those who *build* digital tools and media and those who *study* traditional humanities questions using digital tools and media. Various framed as do vs. think, practice vs. theory, or hack vs. yack, this divide has been most strongly (and provocatively) formulated by Stephen Ramsay. At the 2011 annual Modern Language Association convention in Los Angeles, Ramsay declared, “If you are not making anything, you are not ... a digital humanist”.<sup>1</sup>

I'm going to step around Ramsay's argument here (though I recommend reading the thoughtful discussion that ensued on Ramsay's blog). I mention Ramsay simply as an illustrative example of the various tensions within the digital humanities. There are others too: teaching vs. research,<sup>2</sup> universities vs. liberal arts colleges, centers vs. networks,<sup>3</sup> and so on. I see the presence of so many divides—which are better labeled as *perspectives*—as a sign that there are many stakeholders in the digital humanities, which is a good thing. We're all in this together, even when we're not.<sup>4</sup>

I've always believed that these various divides, which often arise from institutional contexts and professional demands generally beyond our control, are a distracting sideshow to the true power of the digital

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<sup>1</sup> <http://lenz.unl.edu/papers/2011/01/08/whos-in-and-whos-out.html>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://triproftri.wordpress.com/2011/05/14/acceptance-of-pedagogy-dh-mla-2012>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.samplereality.com/2010/03/26/on-the-death-of-the-digital-humanities-center>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://lincolnmullen.com/2010/04/29/digital-humanities-is-a-spectrum-or-were-all-digital-humanists-now>.

humanities, which has nothing to do with *production* of either tools or research. The heart of the digital humanities is not the production of knowledge; it's the *reproduction* of knowledge. I've stated this belief many ways,<sup>5</sup> but perhaps most concisely on Twitter:

DH shouldn't only be about the production of knowledge. It's about challenging the ways that knowledge is represented and shared (October 6, 2010 6:51 am via Twitter for iPad@samplereality, Mark Sample)

The promise of the digital is not in the way it allows us to ask new questions because of digital tools or because of new methodologies made possible by those tools. The promise is in the way the digital reshapes the representation, sharing, and discussion of knowledge. We are no longer bound by the physical demands of printed books and paper journals, no longer constrained by production costs and distribution friction, no longer hampered by a top-down and unsustainable business model. And we should no longer be content to make our work public achingly slowly along ingrained routes, authors and readers alike delayed by innumerable gateways limiting knowledge production and sharing.

I was riffing on these ideas yesterday on Twitter, asking, for example, what's to stop a handful of scholars from starting their own academic press?<sup>6</sup> It would publish epub books and, when backwards compatibility is required, print-on-demand books.<sup>7</sup> Or what about, I wondered, using Amazon Kindle Singles as a model for academic publishing. Imagine stand-alone journal articles, without the clunky apparatus of the journal surrounding it. If you're insistent that any new publishing venture be backed by an imprimatur more substantial than my "handful of scholars," then how about a digital humanities center creating its own publishing unit?

It's with all these possibilities swirling in my mind that I've been thinking about the MLA's creation of an Office of Scholarly Communication,<sup>8</sup> led by Kathleen Fitzpatrick. I want to suggest that this move may in the future stand out as a pivotal moment in the history of the digital humanities. It's not simply that the MLA is embracing the digital humanities and seriously considering how to leverage technology to advance scholarship. It's that Kathleen Fitzpatrick is heading this office. One of the founders of MediaCommons<sup>9</sup> and a strong advocate for open review and experimental

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.samplereality.com/2010/03/06/loud-crowded-and-out-of-control-a-new-model-for-scholarly-publishing>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/samplereality/statuses/73048411082997761>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/kfitz/status/73054050156949504>.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.mla.org/news\\_from\\_mla/news\\_topic&topic=303](http://www.mla.org/news_from_mla/news_topic&topic=303).

<sup>9</sup> <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org>.

publishing,<sup>10</sup> Fitzpatrick will bring vision, daring, and experience to the MLA's Office of Scholarly Communication.

I have no idea what to expect from the MLA, but I don't think high expectations are unwarranted. I can imagine greater support of peer-to-peer review as a replacement of blind review. I can imagine greater emphasis placed upon digital projects as tenurable scholarship. I can imagine the breadth of fields published by the MLA expanding. These are all fairly predictable outcomes, which might have eventually happened whether or not there was a new Office of Scholarly Communication at the MLA.

But I can also imagine less predictable outcomes. More experimental, more peculiar.<sup>11</sup> Equally as valuable though—even more so—than typical monographs or essays. I can imagine scholarly wikis produced as companion pieces to printed books. I can imagine digital-only MLA books taking advantage of the native capabilities of e-readers, incorporating videos, songs, dynamic maps. I can imagine MLA Singles, one-off pieces of downloadable scholarship following the Kindle Singles model. I can imagine mobile publishing, using smartphones and GPS. I can imagine a 5,000-tweet conference backchannel edited into the official proceedings of the conference backchannel.

There are no limits. And to every person who objects, *But, wait, what about legitimacy/tenure/cost/labor/¢ etc.*, I say, you are missing the point. Now is not the time to hem in our own possibilities. Now is not the time to base the future on the past. Now is not the time to be complacent, hesitant, or entrenched in the present.

William Gibson has famously said that “the future is already here, it's just not very evenly distributed.” With the digital humanities we have the opportunity to distribute that future more evenly. We have the opportunity to distribute knowledge more fairly, and in greater forms. The “builders” will build and the “thinkers” will think, but all of us, no matter where we fall on this false divide, we all need to share. Because we can.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/plannedobsolescence>.

<sup>11</sup> [http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~mruppel/MLA2010\\_homepage.htm](http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~mruppel/MLA2010_homepage.htm).

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