Ten Challenges for Digital Humanities and the Way Forward

George Pavlidis, Athena Research Center, Xanthi, Greece

Stella Markantonatou, Athena Research Center, Athens, Greece

Simon Donig, University of Passau, Germany

Adamantios Koumpis, University of Passau, Germany

ABSTRACT

Regardless of whether one supports Digital Humanities as a discipline in its own, 'traditional' Humanities are transforming with the incorporation of computational approaches. In this short position paper, we outline ten challenges that we consider important and propose to kick-off an in-depth dialog for the future shaping of Digital Humanities, without prejudices and preconceptions. The presentation of the challenges situates them with respect to trends and evolutionary developments in society and technology, and some first comments are being made in kicking-off the dialog for the shaping of the future.

KEYWORDS

Challenges, Computational Methods in Humanities, Cultural Informatics, Digital Humanities, Future Directions, Heritage Science

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the Humanities are based primarily on critical or speculative methods and embed a significant historical element, rendering the domain largely distinguished from the Natural and Computational Sciences that are mainly based on empirical approaches. Digital Humanities may have been often considered as a sort of 'auxiliary science' ('*Hilfswissenschaft*') serving the needs of other disciplines and fields of Humanities, focusing on the provision of digital tools and methods to tackle research questions in Humanities. On the other hand, it is still in the stage where many of its practitioners shy away from considering it a (coherent) discipline on its own. Typically, it is considered to be an academic field concerned with the application of computational tools and methods to traditional Humanities disciplines, like History and Archaeology[1]. In addition to the contribution of Computer Science, there are other disciplines to greatly support the Humanities studies, like Archaeometry, which is a mixture of Physics, Chemistry, Math and Computer Science. The use of the word in established phrases, like the 'Digital Art' – the art that is being produced by digital means – reveals that there might be structural difficulties in using an analogy for the definition of 'Digital Humanities' in more compact forms. As a result, there is a tendency to regard the field as

an application of Computer Science in Humanities or vice versa, the application-oriented equivalent of Humanities with the assistance of computer technologies.

There is a need for the people who feel like or identify themselves as 'digital humanists' to define a roadmap that will provide them the means to implement an ambitious agenda. The term 'digital humanist' denotes a person involved in cross-disciplinary work related to or including Humanities Studies and Computer Science, and is rather not convincing, probably, not attractive either – as the term 'computer scientist' might have been a couple of decades ago. The aim of the enterprise is to prove the functionality and the value that Digital Humanities can bring to Humanities, eventually upgrading the former from the status of a 'servant discipline' of the latter, or on the other hand, to totally diffuse and embed the former within the latter and cancel the need for the adjective 'digital'.

In this position paper, we try to identify, layout and comment on ten (10) challenges in the research agenda in Digital Humanities.

THE CHALLENGES

In the following paragraphs, we list some of the challenges, which we consider to be at the heart of the research agenda in Digital Humanities for the future. It is our understanding that this might be a draft agenda, one which other academics and research colleagues will be able to elaborate by providing their views.

Challenge 1: Stop Caring (So Much) to Maintain the Balance With Humanities

The first challenge is the most important one and it may take some time to materialize; however, it is worth putting it first because it deserves it, as it focuses on the balance with traditional Humanities. Do we expect Digital Humanities to come up with answers on questions posed by the 'traditional' Humanities? Or are the former entitled to come up with iconoclastic and novel methods that might pose new questions and challenges to issues that have been regarded as settled or answered? To a greater or lesser extent, all challenges that follow below have their origin back to this first 'foundational' challenge.

Challenge 2: The Applications Make the Science

On the same par with the maxim that the medium is the message, we should feel comfortable to admit that the applications digital humanists come up with form the basis of this 'new' Science. It is the digital humanists who design or build or help shape applications and tools for the better study and interpretation of the (traditional) Humanities though they do not pose the research questions and they do not drive the research inquire – the latter is not part (at least for the time) of Digital Humanities but of the traditional discipline. We could name all the topics of some established Digital Humanities Conferences – and what a long and exciting list of topics that would be. We would like to regard them as forming the basis of a classification scheme like the one we have been using in Computer Science for years (Coulter, 1997) and which – and this is the important point – continuously evolves! The first classification system appeared back in 1964 and was extensively revised six times since then – and the versions appeared whenever people felt there was a need for a new version namely in 1982, in 1983, in 1987, and then in 1991 and 1998, till the current version of 2012. The maxim here might be something like: 'everyone who self-defines their research as part of Digital Humanities is welcome!'

Challenge 3: Taming the Language

Language is important in every human activity – however, it is well known that computer scientists write articles in English without being competent in reading or writing English literature. With Humanities, the case is different: language, at a great extent, defines the research. We cannot imagine Law in the U.S.A., or Germany, or the U.K., or Denmark, or India practiced using a 'sterilized' and context-neutral language; nor for Philosophy or History and any other discipline or field of Humanities.

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