

# Humanities Computing in an Age of Social Change

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Humanities computing in the United States can be considered to have started a few years before 1964, when IBM sponsored what it designated as a Literary Data Processing Conference. While most of the participants in that early conference, despite their often-expressed interest in the concept of nonlinear visualization of texts, were clearly oriented toward the goal of producing a printed book, two generations after that founding conference, we can recognize that the value of their work lies in their having begun to establish humanities computing as a valid occupation of scholars. There was, nevertheless, a need for a common ground on which to record and exchange our ideas of where this new mode of scholarship was leading us; hence the print journal *Computers and the Humanities*.

Not evident to that handful of pioneers in 1964 was the amazing growth of computer applications throughout society that were made possible by the technological advances of the next half-century. Humanities computing has advanced as far as it has almost exclusively because of the revolution on the technological side. Because of the computer revolution, the world we inhabit is no more like the one known to previous generations than that of the twentieth century resembled any of its predecessors.

The drastic changes in our world in the almost half-century since 1964 makes clear that we can no more predict the changes to come than those pioneers did in their own time. Computer-based communication, in particular and especially in its printed form, is being violently altered by the new technology. The openness of the Internet and the Web being a manifestation of a democratic spirit, the burgeoning role of computers in education, including humanities education, can only continue to disrupt the traditional structure of academe.

The long-term consequences of the increasing cost of a postsecondary education and the increasing availability of resources that exceed those of any university would seem to drive toward the replacement of the bricks-and-mortar university by a totally online facility. That paradigm shift requires the aggregation in a central online location of information about the growing resources of the digital humanities. The generation that will prevail in the middle of the twenty-first century, wired to computers for all their needs, social as well as intellectual, will look beyond our current concepts of humanities. How well we prepare for that world, what foundation we construct to emphasize the positive potentials of whatever technology will have evolved, will be the measure of how much we have learned from our humanistic concern for our own history.