

# A Day in the Life of Digital Humanities

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On March 18th, 2009 over 90 people participated in a collaborative documentation project called *A Day in the Life of Digital Humanities*. The participants blogged what they did that day in the spirit of digital humanities as a form of autoethnography that could help answer the question, "just what do we do?"

In this paper we will:

- Discuss the conception, design and delivery of the project,
- Discuss the intellectual property paradigm that we adopted to make this project one that produces open documentation for use by other projects,
- Reflect on the lessons learned about such social research projects and theorize the exercise, and

- Discuss the second Day of DH project that, building on the strengths of the first, will be run March 18th, 2010.

## 1. From Conception to Delivery

The original idea for the project was to develop a communal response to questions asking exactly what it is that we do in the digital humanities. In 2006, "The State of Science & Technology in Canada" from the Council of Canadian Academies reported humanities computing as an emerging field of strength in Canada. Since then, there have been requests in various forms for an explanation of what the previously unnoticed field was.<sup>1</sup>

The form of the response was inspired by a lecture by Edward L. Ayers (currently now President of the University of Richmond) that we had heard about, titled "What Does a Professor Do All Day, Anyway?" Ayers was an early computing historian whose "The Valley of the Shadow" project was one of the two founding IATH projects. In that lecture, he reflected on how people, including his own young son, know little about what a professor does. As he put it,

"In the eyes of most folks, a professor either portentously and pompously lectures people from his narrow shaft of specialized knowledge, or is a bookworm – nose stuck in a dusty volume, oblivious to the world."<sup>2</sup>

The situation is even worse in the digital humanities, where not only do people not know what we do as academics, they also don't know what "humanities computing" or the "digital humanities" are. It's not even clear if practitioners agree with each other on these basic matters. Ayers's approach to answering this question was the simplest and most cohesive: simply to describe each part of his day, task by task. A Day in the Life of Digital Humanities scales this approach up to a participatory project. We hoped to address the questions about the nature of digital humanities academic work by reflecting as a community.

The Day of DH (as we call it) was thus conceived to provide one form of response to the definition of the field: not through speculation, but through observation. In this context we will also briefly demonstrate the WordPress

setup and the wiki that was used to coordinate materials.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. Intellectual Property Paradigm: Collaborative Publishing**

As for all projects with human participants in Canadian academia, we first had to apply for ethics review. We presented the project not simply as a study of what the participants are doing, but as a collaborative publication. The paradigm therefore was that we were organizing a collective documentation project where the results would be a form of publication that would be returned to the community for further study. Some participants went so far as to run visualization tools on the RSS feed of all the entries as they were being posted, thus returning a feed of the posts live to participants, which allowed study to happen as the day proceeded.

One of the problems we encountered was cleaning up the data after the day. The cleaning up of the data involved four broad steps:

1. To comply with ethics, we had to go through and edit (with the participants) the images posted to make sure the images conformed to the ethics regimen we agreed to.
2. We read and indexed the posts with a uniform set of terms, helping draw out semantic relevance in the data.<sup>4</sup>
3. We converted the XML output from the native WordPress format to a more tractable form. Irrelevant fields were removed and content was unescaped, requiring additional editing toward well-formedness. The final cleaned dataset is being review by project participants with notable experience with markup.
4. Finally, we proofed the entire dataset also deleted empty comments. However, in order to preserve the authenticity of the posts, we did not change the prose of the participants.

## **3. Crowdsourcing in the Digital Humanities**

The Day in the Life of Digital Humanities is a modest example of a collaborative "crowdsourcing" project. It is not the first such project in the humanities. For instance, Suda On Line is an excellent example of how a "crowd" can participate in a larger project.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting on

the level of participation in the Day of DH, we believe that some of the strategies we adopted to encourage participation were successful:

- A participant's required contribution was limited to only one day of posting. We hypothesize that if small, flexible tasks contribute to broad participation.
- We did not assume people would participate. Instead we invited people personally, creating a personal connection before issuing an open call for participation. We believe that the personal human contact makes a real difference in explaining to people why they would want to participate.
- The project was structured as a collaborative publication so that participants could get credit for their work and use the results in their own experiments. We tried to make the idea simple to grasp, which is why we chose the "Day in the Life of" title. The title gives the prospective participant an idea of the level of participation and the results.
- A steady but light feed of updates was maintained through a discussion list. We sent about an e-mail a week to keep in touch as the day approached.
- Human contact and communication are essential at all levels - participants are, after all, volunteering their effort to make the project work. For that reason we had a number of people assigned to answer different types of questions quickly, and we spent some time developing online materials to help explain the project and connect people.
- The technology used by participants was reasonably familiar and worked.

## **4. Reflections and Theory**

What then have we learned about the digital humanities from the project? To some extent the project speaks for itself. The project doesn't provide a short answer to questions about what we do. Instead it provides a wealth of detail and reflections. Nonetheless we do have some conclusions based on readings of the entries:

- Many who do computing in the humanities feel isolated and welcome venues for participating in larger concerns. This project

gave some of those isolated a way to feel part of a peer community and to be heard.

- In Humanities research, there is often an inverse relationship between depth and breadth. At their most qualitative and meticulous, humanists may spend years analyzing a short text. To broaden the corpus often necessitates a colder, more mechanical approach to the data. Though perhaps at the expense of structure, the format of Day of DH has resulted in content that is both deep and broad.
- Community projects don't simply document an existing community - to some extent they create it. This is an age-old pattern where a community, in becoming, presents itself as already mature. One participant told us that they were thinking of running something similar at their university as a community-building exercise. While the data is not necessarily an objective representation of what we typically do (if there is such a thing) it is representative of what some of us think about what we do.
- One aim of the Day was to explore the usefulness of autoethnography as a methodology for studying the digital humanities. Nicholas Holt defines autoethnography as a "writing practice [involving] highly personalized accounts where authors draw on their own experiences to extend understanding of a particular discipline or culture".<sup>6</sup> This reflexive study of the participant-researcher's own role in a greater culture thus has created a dataset far richer and more complex than would have otherwise been available if digital humanists had been given a set of parameters, such as a questionnaire, in which to define themselves.
- Willard McCarty proposes that we think of our practice as one of modeling where we are both modeling as a process of exploration and creating models that represent interpretative process.<sup>7</sup> This project can be thought of as collaborative modeling of the field where for one day we used some of our own tools and new methods to think about our research in community.

Further observations we leave for you; after all, the point was to leave the community data stream to think about and with.

## 5. The Second Day of DH

On March 18th, 2010 we plan to run the Second Day of Digital Humanities. This second project will try to address some of the limitations of the first:

- We hope to invite more graduate students to participate. Students appeared resistant to the idea that they had any meaningful contribution to make. One participant, Domenico Fiormonte, engaged his students by having them comment on his posts, an approach we will encourage others to do. Another alternative is to encourage students to share a single blog so they don't feel they have to write more than one post.
- We hope to involve more international participants outside Anglophone regions. In particular we hope to involve more Francophone participants in Quebec, but we also plan to invite participants from a broader range of regions and provide them with support early so they feel comfortable posting.
- We hope to find a technology for posting that outputs clean XML without forcing participants to learn markup. The technology will be chosen in conjunction with participants and may be hosted by a participating centre.
- We hope to encourage use of a common set of categories built on those we used for the post-day tagging.
- We plan to better incorporate micro-blogging (Twitter) so that participants could use that technology as an alternative.

## 6. Conclusion

There are a couple of different lenses that might be appropriate to the discussion of the Day of DH. First, it can be seen as an exercise by the participants and the larger community in building social capital. Bourdieu's work on social capital emphasizes both the actual and potential resources available to the individual through participation in a network.<sup>8</sup> Coleman focuses on the potential benefits to the individual.<sup>9</sup> Putnam highlights the value of social capital to the community, equating community participation with civic virtue.<sup>10</sup> Individuals involved in the DDH have had an opportunity to increase,

extend, or consolidate existing social capital through self-revelation within the framework of the day. The DH community in the larger sense has had a moment of opportunity for critical self-reflection.

The second possible lens deals primarily with that possibility for self-reflection. Much as every design can be read as a comment on the act of designing and the discipline of design, or every building as a contribution to the ongoing discussion of architecture, so DDH provides a moment of self-directed reflection on what it means to be a digital humanist in a world where other digital humanists are also active.

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### Notes

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