

Present, Not Voting: Digital Humanities in the Panopticon

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The field of Digital Humanities continues to change and evolve rapidly, as we utilise, appropriate, and develop internet, communication, and computational technologies. In this plenary, a specific focus will be placed on one individual project – The Transcribe Bentham project at UCL (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/transcribe-bentham/>) – as a viewpoint through which to witness the changing demands and needs placed on those working within the Digital Humanities.

Transcribe Bentham is a one year, Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project, housed under the auspices of the Bentham Project at UCL (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/>). The Bentham Project aims to produce new editions of the scholarship of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). Bentham was a political radical. An English jurist, philosopher, and legal and social reformer, he became a leading theorist in Anglo-American philosophy of law, and influenced the development of welfarism. He is well known for his advocacy of utilitarianism and animal rights, but is perhaps most famous for his work on the “panopticon”: a type of prison in which wardens can observe (*-opticon*) all (*pan-*) prisoners without the incarcerated being able to tell whether or not they are being watched. This concept has influenced prison reform, philosophy, literature, and social media since.

Bentham and UCL have a close relationship. Whilst it is untrue that he founded UCL, he did influence those who did, and as the first English University to open its doors to all, regardless of race, creed or political belief (provided they could afford the fees) UCL went a long way to fulfilling Bentham's vision of how Universities should operate. He took a great interest in the new institution, and UCL now hosts Bentham's 60,000 pages of handwritten manuscripts arranged in 174 boxes. His “auto-icon” famously sits in the main cloisters: Bentham's preserved skeleton, dressed in his own clothes, surmounted by a wax head, as per his will and testament. An apocryphal story has it that Bentham's “auto-icon” is wheeled yearly into UCL Senate meetings, where he is noted in the minutes as being “present, not voting”.

Twelve volumes of Bentham's correspondence have so far been published by the Bentham Project, plus various collections of his work on jurisprudence and legal matters (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/Publications/index.htm>). However, there is much more work to be done to make his writings more accessible, and to provide transcripts of the materials therein. Although a previous grant from the AHRC in 2003-6 has allowed for the completion of a catalogue of the manuscripts held within UCL (<http://www.benthampapers.ucl.ac.uk/>), and transcriptions have been completed of some 10,000 folios, there are many hours of work that need to be invested in reading, transcribing, labelling, and making accessible the works of this interdisciplinary historical figure if they are to be analysed, consulted, and utilised by scholars across the various disciplines interested in Bentham's writings.

Crowdsourcing – the harnessing of online activity to aid in large scale projects that require human cognition – is becoming of interest to those in the library, museum and cultural heritage industry, as institutions seek ways to publically engage their online communities, as well as aid in creating useful and usable digital resources. As one of the first cultural and heritage projects to apply crowdsourcing to a non-trivial task, UCL's Bentham Project has recently set up the “Transcribe Bentham” initiative; an ambitious, open source, participatory online environment which is being developed to aid in transcribing 10,000 folios of Bentham's handwritten documents. To be launched in July 2010, this experimental project will aim to engage with individuals such as school children, amateur historians, and other interested parties, who can provide time to help us read Bentham's manuscripts. The integration of user communities will be key to the success of the project, and an additional project remit is to monitor the success of trying to engage the wider community with such documentary material:

will we get high quality, trustworthy transcriptions as a result of this work? Will people be interested in volunteering their time and effort to read the (poor) handwriting of a great philosopher? What technical and pragmatic difficulties will we run into? How can we monitor success in a crowdsourced environment?

In addition to introducing the project, this plenary will use the Bentham Project, and the Transcribe Bentham open participatory initiative, as a panopticon through which to view the changing nature of Digital Humanities scholarship, and the role of the Digital Humanities scholar, alluding to other related work in the field, and concerns which have emerged in the development and discussion of the project aims. How do issues such as digital identity, scholarly and community engagement, professionalization and employment issues, funding, short scale projects, and large scale digitisation affect the role of the digital humanist? How can we successfully embrace ever changing internet technologies, and trends such as crowdsourcing, to further our research in cultural heritage and computational methods? How can we measure the impact of our endeavours in the online environment, and how can we persuade others of the value of our work? What can we do better – as a discipline – to make sure our voice is heard in the academy, so that the role, remit, and focus of Digital Humanities can be treated as a bona fide academic endeavour? What can we do better – as individuals – to further the cause of Digital Humanities as a discipline, as well as fostering our own scholarly development?

By looking at specific issues that have arisen in the Transcribe Bentham project, this plenary aims to provide an honest and open overview of pressing concerns and opportunities for both the project, and Digital Humanities as a discipline, in the current information and academic environments.

Melissa Terras and Transcribe Bentham can be followed on twitter at #TranscriBentham and #melissaterras respectively. The complete transcript of this plenary will be made available shortly after delivery on Melissa Terras' blog: <http://melissaterras.blogspot.com/>, and viewable thereafter in the blog archive for July 2010.