Prof. Dr. Paolo Bianchini, Università degli Studi di Torino, Dipartimento di Filosofia e Scienze dell'Educazione, Via S. Ottavio, 20, 10124 Torino, Italy, paolo.bianchini@unito.it

---

Frederick W. Gibbs
From Theory to Practice in the Digital Humanities

Simone Lässig's engaging and wide ranging essay takes a broad view of the future of digital history, highlighting a number of disciplinary changes that should be on the minds of all historians, regardless of research specialty or career phase. As the digital humanities have come to resemble a kaleidoscope of various disciplines, methods, and projects, it now engenders vastly different responses to the question of how "the digital" will affect "the humanities." One's view of potentially productive ways forward varies tremendously with even subtle shifts in perspective. To hopefully complement the well-nourishing food for thought that Lässig has provided us, I'd like to offer a slightly different take on a few points; most of her excellent analysis I pass over in silence because all I could do is nod vigorously in agreement.
Beginning with a dose of a healthy skepticism as an antidote to the utopian digital kool-aid hocked by new media evangelists, Lässig rightfully warns that it can be all too easy to "give our unconditional and enthusiastic assent to all the innovations they entail." Right on. Media revolutions are hardly new, she points out, and they are never what their pundits predict they will be. Lässig encourages us, then, "to rein in the sense of living in an age of media revolution which seems to have gripped a large number of scholars in the field." Besides, when we take a longer view of the digital humanities phenomenon, she reminds us that "historians' interest in and engagement with digital research practices and academic communication formats is no 'new' phenomenon." Lässig highlights digital continuity by noting historians' early use of listservs.
Lässig's comparison raises an important question: To what extent are digital humanities about modernizing existing or traditional practices, and to what extent does it lead to different kinds of activities altogether? The answer holds important implications for how we might (or not) reshape professional training and practices. It seems that digital humanities scholars have often motivated their methods in terms of novelty. Indeed, many of the digital possibilities at hand for both research and dissemination have no analog counterparts. At least in terms of academic humanities – considering the amount of digitized historical sources, data, and tools for researching history at fundamentally new scales, creating dynamic and reusable research platforms, and communicating to a broad audience immersed in a sea of global, participatory media – perhaps we actually *are* living in an age of media revolution

that is transforming the humanities (not just the digital variety) even more pervasively than other so-called media revolutions ever did.

While Lässig endeavors to quell the revolutionary rhetoric early on, she also alludes to several of these profound changes throughout her essay. I want to highlight what seems to be an implicit point of essay as a whole: the value of approaching questions about future directions of digital humanities with both the novelty and continuity perspectives in mind. Some historians might be far more motivated to engage with digital methods and criticism when seeing them as an extension of traditional practices. Surely, a significant portion of digital humanities is more about modernizing than fundamental change. Yet there may be real danger in minimizing the novelty as well. If digital concerns are not really new, then we don't need to envision fundamentally new publications standards or venues, peer review processes, or curriculum change; scholarly societies don't need to explicitly talk about digital scholarship (and will continue to reward only print scholarship). Necessary tweaks will inevitably happen through the processes by which humanities continually adapt (even if slowly) to the world around them. We didn't really *need* to theorize about the shift from printed newsletters to listservs (though of course we could, and probably someone has) because this was more of a procedural than categorical change. But, as Lässig suggests, the emergence of new methods and forms of scholarship that can't even be printed effectively – because the evidence is best explored interactively rather than read – requires potentially profound changes in professional practice so that such work can get into and contribute within the scholarly ecosystem.

Regardless of where one falls on the spectrum of perceived novelty, one genuinely "new" feature of scholarship, as Lässig seems to say, is its inferiority. Today's students and early career researchers are "digital natives" who are too easily seduced by the ease of digital access, which has led, for instance, to sloppy bibliographies and suspect research. But perhaps what is different is not that we have more mediocre work from our so-called digital natives, but that it is significantly more visible than it used to be. In the grand scheme of things at the present time – though there is some evidence that this is slowly changing – most professional historians have little incentive to do excellent digital work early in their careers, as Lässig later points out. We might even say that the profession contributes to a digital divide of sorts, not based on access to digital tools, but professional acceptability of their use. What is judged the best work still must appear in traditional forms per the tribal indoctrinations of historians.

Or perhaps it has become just as easy to react against novelty as it is to romanticize printed scholarship, which was vetted, reviewed, and thoroughly winnowed into book form and scholarly journals. But let's be honest: an awful lot of scholarship of dubious value continues to be published by academic presses at all levels of prestige. More importantly, Lässig alludes to a larger problem that is perhaps more profound than the sins of succumbing to the convenience of digital access (although centering a traditional research project around a few select archives isn't much different): the fact that as a discipline (a fully contestable label, I know), digital humanities have very few models or mechanisms for peer reviewing the complex digital scholarship starting to be produced. Worse yet, these non-existent standards have not trickled down into disciplinary sub-fields. Lässig is right in that much digital work simply not very good as scholarship goes, even if it might break new ground in other areas, like innovative uses of technology in the humanities. If we need to talk to the digital humanities, one of the topics must be how we can consistently and fairly evaluate fundamentally new kinds of digital scholarship. It is not enough to say that it should "count" or not be judged as inferior simply because of its medium (though both are true, obviously). But we can't try to

compare apples and oranges, either. We need an aesthetics of digital scholarship that articulates priorities and rules of how it can be winnowed effectively, as well as slip into the mainstream scholarship generally rather than as individual digital projects in their virtual silos.

Lässig makes many important points about digital methods not replacing traditional practices, but rather complementing them, even as the amount of digital sources grows exponentially and starts to include new kinds of sources, too, like Facebook and Twitter feeds. I couldn't agree more, that new kinds of sources place considerably new demands on humanists of all stripes. It was here I hoped that Lässig's perceptive comments about the difficulties of managing and using born-digital sources would crescendo into a rousing call for disciplinary diversity and critical data work within the humanities. But instead, she tells us that "history will not be able to furnish answers to these questions on its own," thus necessitating for partnerships with information sciences and data-centric institutions that have developed expertise in information storage and retrieval.

There is certainly some good sense to her call for new kinds of collaboration. The social sciences and computer science have been working with large data sets for a long time and we have a lot to learn from them. But it is perhaps worth emphasizing that such collaborations are highly variable and merely one potential way forward rather than necessarily the most useful or desirable. It is highly problematic that the disciplines identified with the requisite expertise (although there will always be important local exceptions) typically don't care much about historical research, if not the humanities generally. I do like the sound of it: "The challenge of compiling major digital corpora of sources and securing them in the long term is ideal terrain on which we can work with computer scientists on developing new methods and technologies for accessing and analyzing these corpora." I do think this kind of collaboration could be productive in certain cases. But I am skeptical that data access and analysis usually poses an interesting problem for computer scientists that pushes outward on the boundaries of their discipline. Furthermore, it is entirely unclear how to bridge disciplines with fundamentally different professionalization and publication practices.

If we bear in mind the incremental nature of disciplinary change, however profound it might be, perhaps external collaborations are less useful than expanding skills sets from within the discipline. If you've only used paper archival resources for historical scholarship and suddenly want to collect and text mine 5 terabytes of data, then yes, you need outside help. But probably you should scale up more gradually. On the whole, it seems likely that historical research projects will become increasingly complex as the technical skills and imaginations of the researchers gradually expand. The many (and quickly outdated) digital history syllabi floating around cyberspace attest to the vibrancy of training that inches historians and other humanists towards significantly greater facility with data than ever before. Furthermore, many of the most promising techniques of digital history, such as GIS analysis and text mining, don't have to be done on huge scales that require outside expertise; even small experiments but can add tremendous value even within the context of an otherwise conventionally conceived and executed historical research project. This point also underscores the importance for embracing simultaneously the continuity and discontinuity of digital methods in the humanities. The predominance of smaller change driving the uptake of digital methods rather than the innovative work at very large scales holds important implications for disciplinary training and research practice.

Lässig is right that these new possibilities for research (regardless of scale) place new and perhaps unwelcome demands on our time. An important question about relevant skills and

priorities thus looms large, as "the necessity of finding individual solutions for each new project makes this aspect of work in this area highly inefficient and diverts time, energy and focus which could be productively used elsewhere." But why isn't such work seen as productive for a historian in the same way that remedial and often repetitious bibliographic work, or even archival research, is necessary for new projects? Aren't the individual solutions required for any digital project analogous to the requisite and often inefficient digging, writing, and reframing that are part and parcel of the nature of scholarship? Could better review and legitimization practices of digital scholarship reduce inefficiency? Is there not a strong parallel between the situating our research and data digitally in the way we've done so historiographically for more traditional work? Why is not solving such technical challenges what it means to be a successful humanist in the 21st century?

I want to conclude by addressing two larger issues that Lässig provocatively frames in her essay, beginning with the nature of the digital humanities themselves. Working with computer scientists in "compiling major digital corpora of sources and securing them in the long term" is "digital humanities in its most precise sense." This raises very interesting questions about the boundaries of digital humanities, particularly the way the "precise sense" here seems to invoke a particularly narrow view of the field that perhaps describes the future of library and information science more than the humanities themselves. Nevertheless, Lässig's questions about institutional needs are very forward thinking, especially as sustainability for digital projects continues to be a largely unsolved problem. She continues: "[Digital humanities] will, however, only have a genuine chance of becoming a field of research which appeals to a wider group of historians if it is not solely driven by technology, but instead shaped also by the research interests of history's various sub-disciplines." She is absolutely right that humanities should not be shaped primarily by technology. But it is not clear why digital humanities should be a separate field of research. Won't digital humanities have most fully succeeded when it is no longer necessary? When it has been integrated into other disciplines and curricula?

Such statements about disciplinary identity are important, but when Lässig exhorts us to talk to the digital humanities, who should we be talking to? Perhaps when the term "digital humanities" first emerged as a rebranding of humanities computing around fifteen years ago, it was possible to have a more or less coherent audience in mind. Now, with increased opportunities for funding and the proliferation of digital institutes and centers across the globe, the practitioners of what might be (or have been) considered digital humanities is far too variegated to be treated as a monolithic whole. To what extent do the digital humanities as a codified community really exist anymore? Perhaps the digital humanities have become integrated enough into various disciplines and disciplinary practices that, even while it can still make sense to talk about an autonomous field, the more important conversations about future change now must happen within disciplinary subfields that grapple with similar sets of historical resources and techniques useful to them. In any case, it seems that conversations concerned with the digital's intersection with the theory and practice of history need to be more visible and less directed towards an amorphous "digital humanist" crowd. Of course academic history is increasingly diverse in the ways its practitioners interface with "the digital," and certainly not everyone will find it useful or interesting, nor should they. Not all historians need to engage in digital debates any more than they need to engage with debates about Marxism, feminism, or structuralism, or postmodernism or any other historical lenses that are incredibly useful in some ways and totally useless in others.

Lässig's outline of potential stumbling blocks of the digital humanities asks smart and crucial questions that we must continue to discuss. Fortunately, as digital humanities became a thing, so to speak, many humanists were eager to take up the yoke of methodological experiment, inquiry, and criticism, and have been grappling with these questions for many years. But there is a limit to how far these issues can be fruitfully worked out in advance. While theoretical debates are indeed important for how they can shape and inform practice, they also require corresponding pragmatic experience to help guide theory itself. In other words, maybe we've already talked enough. Perhaps the most prominent imperative now lies in implementing and formalizing the results of an already vibrant conversation about the opportunities and challenges of digital history that have flourished for the better part of a decade, particularly taking action in our scholarly societies, our local institutions, dissertation committees, tenure and promotion boards, and, even more personally, how we value the use of our time as historians when confronted with tools, methods, and research possibilities that we scarcely imagined when getting into our fields. Digital historians, we need to act.

Prof. Dr. Frederick W. Gibbs, University of New Mexico, Department of History, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA, fwgibbs@unm.edu