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Digital humanities needs equality between humanists and technicians

The perception of technicians as non-intellectual workers contributes to the undervaluing of technical career paths, says Urszula Pawlicka-Deger

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As digital practices become increasingly institutionalised in the humanities, we are experiencing the development of a new interdisciplinary community gathered around a common place: the laboratory.

The idea of a humanities lab is not as novel as you might think. Cathy N Davidson, a professor at the City University of New York, called for them as long ago as 1999. But she envisioned them merely as places to gather a group of thinkers from different fields. Digital humanities labs are not just about collaboration; they follow science's lead in embracing technology-driven experimentation.

King's Digital Lab, Stanford Literary Lab, the Digital Humanities Institute at the University of Sheffield, Sussex Humanities Lab, the University of Virginia Library Scholars' Lab, the Digital Humanities Lab of the University of Basel, and the British Library Labs are examples of digital humanities labs that have successfully been conducting collaborative computing research and developing digital tools and software for scholarly projects, as well as supporting work with data and digital collections.

Despite the critical debates that have been going on around digital humanities for nearly a decade, the field has never been in a better place. It is highly popular with students. The department of digital humanities at King's College London, for instance, now has almost 1,000 students, the highest number in the entire Faculty of Arts and Humanities, and has grown by 11 academic staff over just a year. Nor is it alone; universities across Europe and North America have been hiring lecturers and researchers with explicit knowledge in digital cultural heritage, cultural analytics, data modelling and digital activism.

Research funding schemes for advancing digital scholarship are also expanding, and projects are getting more advanced in scale, capacity and ambition. The UK's Living with Machines project, for instance, gathers more than 30 people from across institutions and disciplines (including computer scientists and mathematicians) to reconsider the impact of technology on the lives of ordinary people during the Industrial Revolution.

As such, digital humanities has been transforming into a hybrid community of practice, with its own critical questions revolving around the use, development and interrogation of big data, software, computational techniques and digital cultures. Digital humanities' future no longer revolves around the question of what it is but rather how its complex technical, operational, methodological and social aspects can be equally addressed and solidly sustained.

Addressing those challenges is the responsibility of not just those who call themselves "digital humanists" but of everyone who contributes to the development of digital knowledge and artefacts, a group that also includes social scientists, librarians, archivists, computer scientists, data scientists, software engineers, designers, managers and funders. Together, these groups can offer not just critical attention to technologies and classification systems but also awareness about technical constraints, sustainability and open-source pragmatism.

The problem is that not all these groups are equally visible and recognised, and labour issues are increasingly salient. Academic precarity is endemic in such a fast-growing area as the digital humanities. Also, the all-too-common perception of technicians as non-intellectual workers contributes to the undervaluing of technical career paths, given the greater institutional valorisation of academic positions. The activities underpinning digital projects, such as digitisation, technical development, design and maintenance, tend to be less visible and recognised than the academic interpretive work.

An example of expertise that has been gaining ground in the digital humanities but has struggled to be fully recognised is research software engineering (RSE). Its emergence reflects that the digital humanities community is ready to admit that it cannot rely solely on off-the-shelf commercial technologies and cannot develop bespoke software systems to address specific research questions without adequate technical expertise. Yet, despite the efforts of the Society of Research Software Engineers and the Software Sustainability Institute, emerging job titles such as digital humanities research software engineer remain unclear.

Moreover, universities often lack a long-term career-development path and clear hiring policy; most crucially, whether RSE people should be hired on academic contracts (imposing requirements to teach and conduct research) or professional service ones. This affects how research software engineers are credited in projects and whether their work is recognised as research output.

Collaboration between the curiosity-driven humanities, with its focus on building narratives, and the product-driven work of software engineering shouldn't be expected to be easy. But if together we are to further push the boundaries of computationally intensive research, all sides need listen to each other with respect, acknowledge and trust each other's work, and embrace differences in their respective research cultures.

Introducing a fair publication policy, such as the one recently published by King's, is a step towards assuring that the work performed by research technicians and technology and skills specialists is acknowledged in research outputs. Recognition of contribution is a prerequisite

for research production. But only if further such steps are taken will digital humanities be able to fully cohere as a community of practice and embrace a future bright with socio-technological challenges.

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