What's the Use? Exploring Non-academic Applications of (Computational) Literary Studies

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In spite of decades of studies and manifestos arguing for the 'use' of the humanities for various purposes, from their capacity to form citizens (e.g. Nussbaum 1998, 2010) through to more specific appeals to their potential to improve technology development (Madsbjerg 2017), the idea of an 'applied humanities' has yet to take explicit hold within our training and research paradigms. In spite of this, however, appeals to the very humanities-relevant power of narrative and storytelling seem ever more present in new journalism, brand narratives, narrative medicine (Charon 2011), bibliotherapy (Gallagher 2020; Lenkowsky 1987), and even narrative economics (Shiller 2019).

If storytelling seems to be everywhere, however, where does that leave the literary scholar? Or indeed the computational literary scholar, given that awareness of the power of data also seems to have become ubiquitous? While these questions may not have a significant impact on the day-to-day work of the average individual scholar, they are of significant importance for the builder of infrastructure. As the products of particular epistemic and organisational cultural contexts, the data collections, services, communication channels, and other design choices underpinning research infrastructures can often unintentionally obscure their utility (or even existence) from those who might find them useful, in particular if those users are from outside of professional literary research.

For this reason, the European-funded Computational Literary Studies Infrastructure (CLS INFRA, https://clsinfra.io/) project is exploring not only the needs and methods of currently known and clearly emerging user groups, but also of potential users from outside of the academy. In order to do this, the project team is engaging in a two-phase research process: first, we are extracting from existing project examples and published research a taxonomy of approaches that can be thought of as comprising a toolkit for applied literary studies. This research is now largely complete, and while it may yet grow or be refined in the course of phase two, our current taxonomy of applied literary studies approaches includes the following: 1) using fictional narratives as evidence for making claims about past and present cultural and historical identities and values (Southgate 2009; Westphal 2011); 2) using fictional narratives to build or access predictive models (Pinto and Medina 2020; Wertheimer 2021; Greenfield 2021); 3) using fictional narratives as a means to prototype future scenarios, cultures, identities and technologies (Johnson 2009); and 4) using fictional narratives as a mechanism for specific capacity building, such as developing empathy (Thexton et al. 2019). Needless to say, the opportunity to enhance these approaches with appropriate data, analytics and critical literary competence could be of great interest and benefit.

In phase 2 of this exploration (January - June 2023), we will be testing these conclusions through a series of 15-20 focussed interviews with professionals and enthusiasts from beyond literary research, representing the perspectives of publishing, journalism, medicine, therapy policy-making and management consultancy.

From these interactions, we will develop user scenarios and user stories to inform the CLS INFRA development. In this short paper, we will report on both the taxonomy and the interviews, with the goal of both informing CLS and DH researchers more widely about the potential resonances of their work, and also of instigating debate about the edges of our field. Through this work, we hope not only to expand the user base for CLS methods and hone the infrastructural offering, but also increase and enhance the diversity of collaborations and networks in the field.

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