

The role of labels and metaphors in investigating interconnections between the Digital Humanities and the Humanities

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It is not uncommon for practitioners of Digital Humanities (DH) to portray their research and colleagues as revolutionary. Looking to the published literature, for example, it can be noticed that a significant number of articles use the term in order to describe, define, demarcate and categorise Digital Humanities. These include articles with titles like ‘The Digital Humanities Revolution’ (Mattison 2006); articles and pieces that describe the work of Digital Humanities as being revolutionary in nature or effect, for example, the ‘Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0’ (Presner et al. 2009), which explicitly refers to the ‘Digital Humanities revolution’; while works such as Matt Gold’s ‘Whose revolution? Towards a more equitable Digital Humanities’(2012) also consider the supposed revolution in a more critical way.

Are Digital Humanists revolutionaries and is their work revolutionary? Indeed, what is meant by this term and, looking to the historical record, what other labels have been used by practitioners of DH to describe their work? It is clear that most disciplines tell creation myths and stories and identify with various labels. These can offer a coherent and stable narrative about where a discipline perceives it has come from, what it believes it is doing and why it has taken the shape that it has. This serves an important purpose given the inherently ‘changing nature of knowledge domains over time’ (p.21) demonstrated by Becher (1989). Taylor (1976), who looked at the role of ‘heroic myths’ in the discipline of Geography has argued that their function is to ‘create an ‘overall purpose and cohesion to the very obvious disparate researches of members of the geography community’’ (p.131)

This paper will take as its starting point that the labels that DH has appropriated in order to describe itself to both fellow practitioners, and the Academy as a whole, can grant a key insight into its connections with, and divergences from, the Humanities itself. The stories and labels that Digital Humanists tell and use about the discipline have received relatively little sustained analysis. McCarty (2005) examined three well established metaphors: Tree, Turf and Centre and, from the perspective of Humanities Computing, found them lacking; in their place he argued for the metaphor ‘archipelago’, having earlier argued for the metaphor of ‘Phoenician trader’ (1999). This paper will draw on archival research, a comprehensive literature review as well as close readings of oral history sources created during the ‘Hidden Histories: Uncovering the “hidden histories” of computing in the Humanities c.1949 – 1980’ project (see, for example, Nyhan, Flinn et al 2012 and the project’s website: <http://hiddenhistories.omeka.net/>). It is hoped that it will contribute to a better understanding of how DH conceptualises its interconnections with the Humanities and that it may help to foster a more critical dialogue on this issue that has heretofore been evident.

References

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