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Theory First

It's easy to be reasonable about the relationship we'd like to see between digital humanities and "Theory." Each should inform the other. After all, humanists who put big-T Theory before any empirical data foolishly close their ears to the new evidence digital can create; digital humanists who ignore theory entirely jeopardize not only their careers but the soundness of their conclusions. To take two examples from the theory-friendly side of the spectrum in digital humanities; we should heed Natalia Cecire's [call](#) to treat digital humanities as important because it transforms humanistic practice; but we should also be mindful of Ted Underwood's concerns [that claims for the primacy of theory often amount to little more than a power play](#), serving to reify existing class distinctions inside the academy. In practice, this probably means digital humanists can keep calm and carry on, with greater tolerance for the occasional French name tossed into the discussion; meanwhile the theory-inclined should know they have a seat at the new table, though not necessarily at the head. Even more hack, better yack. What's not to love?

I've been flirting for a while with a much less reasonable point of view. It's based around two fairly tendentious convictions; both seem convincing enough to me that I want to try spelling them out.

1. Work in digital humanities should always begin with a grounding in a theory from humanistic traditions. If it doesn't, it will aimlessly reproduce a problematic social world.

2. The greatest hope for renewing our shared theoretical traditions in humanities research, and perhaps the only possible route, is to use massive stores of data digitally.

That is to say: theory and digital humanities aren't two separate enterprises that may be able to collaborate fruitfully. They are much closer to being one and the same thing. Digital humanities that doesn't put theory first ends up not really being humanities; social theory that doesn't engage with the explanatory power and communicative potential of vast digital data fails to take seriously its own conviction that deeper structures are readable in the historical record.

I've argued the second point elsewhere a bit, so let me focus on the first. (I should say that by theory, I mostly mean social or critical theory---those branches of philosophy that aim to change the world by understanding it. Just which one is not important here, though in practice, that is the only important thing.)

At their core, the digital humanities are the practice of using technology to create new objects for humanistic interrogation. (That's how I think of it, at least.) This has rightly led much of digital humanities' focus to lie in public humanities; there is enormous excitement about the potential of visualizations, exhibits, and tools to encourage non-humanists to think humanistically. ([I've talked about this before](#)).

But there is just as much reason to be excited about the prospects of creating new texts for humanists themselves to read. These are texts that bear little relation to the sort of books that we are used to reading. Visualizations, algorithmic rearrangements, and summary statistics aren't interpretations. They are texts in themselves. And they demand new sorts of mental gymnastics the same way that a newly discovered archive or poem does. The charts of the Stanford Literature Lab or the lists of Stephen Ramsay are creating new works that demand new kinds of readings; this development creates even more hope that digital humanities could transform the academic humanities at their core.

The trick is that we have to decide what new objects we want to read. Social networks, n-gram trajectories, interactive maps; objects that used to be prohibitively difficult to produce can now be assembled in an hour or a weekend. The technical chore of creating these new texts is neither as hard nor as important as figuring out what they should be. How do we decide what to make?

The answer, I am convinced, is that we should have prior beliefs about the ways the world is structured, and only ever use digital methods to try to create works which let us watch those structures in operation. The more scientifically minded might want to scream 'confirmation bias!' at this, but the wonderful thing about the humanities is that they have always allowed scholars to work from problem to evidence, not vice-versa. And while harnessing our work to theoretical agendas may dampen the ludic joy so easy to find in digital sandboxes, play alone can drift down dangerously well-worn paths.

The evidence and the tools at the disposal of digital humanists are not neutral. Research in the humanities has always been perilous, since our sources are so frequently shaped by those with power; digital proposes to do the same things to our tools. One of the things that I find the most exciting about textual data is that for once we have a massive statistical store that wasn't collected by a state, with all the Foucauldian intimations contemporary historians are right to fret about. But without the agenda theory provides, we lose the distance from present power true criticism requires.

The unreconstructed texts of the past make us think in old ways. Archives, libraries, censuses, atlases: all of these force us to read juxtapositions far more aligned with historical ways of thinking than the reconfigurations possible with digital texts. Most historians, at least, are trained to think that this is fundamentally a good thing, because it gets us out of the cognitive ruts of the contemporary world. The past is a foreign... something, and travel broadens the mind. I agree to a point that's good; nothing's more important for the historian than realizing that categories that are now sundered apart were once the same.

The promise and danger of the digital is that it lets us displace these texts, even though by only a hair's breadth, out of the systems of the past. Displacement is neutral in itself. Digital humanities would be a disaster if it simply rewrote our cultural heritage to fit neatly into the categories of the present instead of those of the past. That's why we need theory, which reconfigures the way we look at the world in terms of difficult to see structures that mask the truth: systems and lifeworld, doxa and habitus. There's a powerful significance there, and we need it.

The reason that digital humanities need to put theory first is not to pacify the powers-that-be, but to harness their own creativity towards productive ends. The solipsism of academia sometimes leads us to conflate power with tenure; but the real big game in the modern world does not wear tweed jackets. When humanists cite theory in protecting their turf, it is not just from luddism or self-regard; it is because they have a humane agenda, and fear that digital humanities do not. Some

of the great virtues of digital humanities---pragmatic usefulness, public outreach, borrowing from the sciences---only make it more suspect. Whatever the technical sophistication of digital humanities, it does not deserve to command those heights while its ends are impure.

Until then, skeptics are right to worry that all's not on the level. Something's fishy when a purportedly non-ideological movement shows up on the scene promising revolutionary change that looks suspiciously like the non-academic status quo. Why, exactly, should the 'next big thing' in the humanities come from the whitest, malest subfield this side of diplomatic history? Why does the *New York Times* cover the new field's projects so much more enthusiastically than it does traditional work? Why has digital humanities attracted more enthusiasm from state funders, across agencies and nation, than the humanities have seen since the Cold War ended? I often think: one of the things digital humanities is potentially very, very good at is naturalizing the world as it is. And our reflexive ways of thinking about the world are just what theory has always sought to get us away from; the nightmare from which it tries to jolt us awake.

Ted Underwood says that "Theory" is "not a determinate object belonging to a particular team." I'm not sure that's quite right. Theory belongs to all sorts of teams, but they all share something fundamental: they are the losers. The winners don't need new perspectives to shift their way of seeing from the world's; the losers do. What good the humanities have ever done largely lies in helping the losers along.

The digital humanities is perfectly poised at the moment to optimistically and beautifully affirm the world through all of history as it is now, full of progress and decentralized self-organizing networks and rational actors making free choices; or it might also try to take up what Adorno called the only responsible philosophy: to reveal the cracks and fissures of the world in all its contradictions with otherwordly light. That's the demand placed on digital humanities by theory, and it must come first. All else is mere technique.[1]

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Notes:

[1]   Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (1951. London: Verso, 2005), 247.