

*The Digital Humanities: What Does It Offer Today's Graduate Student?*

Interview of Professor Michael Hancher (UMN-Twin Cities) by Jennifer Jodell.

When IBM suggested fifty years ago that computers might be used to assist researchers in the Humanities with tasks such as authorship attribution and literary style, three major conferences were held at the Watson Research Center (IBM) and at Yale. The wide-ranging potential of what was then termed "humanities computing" went largely unheeded, however, save perhaps by those who sought a quicker way to auto-generate indexes and word lists. Today, the thought of conducting research without some assistance from computers--from word processing to online searching--is unthinkable. Perhaps this is why some in the Humanities, including graduate students, find the latest incarnation of the term confusing.

Digital Humanities... As opposed to what? Hard copy Humanities?

Due to the ubiquity of computers and confusion regarding the name, some in the Humanities exhibit little curiosity, even indifference, toward the Digital Humanities. As research for this article, graduate students were asked for their impressions of the field. Some admitted that they thought it offered nothing more than souped-up search features for traditional research. Others associated it with line graphs that reminded them of old-fashioned screen savers, while still others (such as the author) imagined a vast archive in virtual reality for the world's arcana, the twenty-first century's version of the warehouse at the close of *Indiana Jones*, only less dusty and easier to search.

For those of us who conceive of the Digital Humanities as a means of storage and retrieval, or as a high-powered version of the computing power we already enjoy, DH may seem ancillary to the presumed heart of Humanities research--i.e., that communion of scholar,

text, black coffee, and pondering we've come to know as close reading. But is this a forward-thinking attitude? What might we--meaning graduate students --miss if we turn an apathetic eye to this (re-)emerging field?

*Chronicle* had a chance to sit down with Professor Michael Hancher (UMN-Twin Cities), a professor of English specializing in nineteenth-century literature who has long followed with interest the development of humanities computing, now called Digital Humanities.

*Chronicle: How would you define Digital Humanities?*

Hancher: As for the definition, perhaps in a sense all Humanities will be digital in some fashion--or perhaps we're already there. The problem of definition relates to the fact that Digital Humanities has been rebranded over the years. DH really started to come into focus fifty years ago when IBM encouraged scholars in the Humanities to harness the power of computers, although it was called computing in the humanities then, not Digital Humanities. The next version coincided with Google's digitization project, its plan to digitize the libraries. Google's project, which draws on dozens of major research libraries, brought previously inaccessible texts into easy reach. At the time that was happening, society was saturated with the word "digital," thanks to the popularity of digital cameras and digital sound recording, and the name Digital Humanities emerged. Now the term is becoming prominent enough that it's open to definition and redefinition.

*Chronicle: What do you find attractive about the Digital Humanities?*

Hancher: I think it helps me as a reader, and in thinking about Victorian texts – or current idioms, for that matter -- in a new way. It also provides a means to look at the shape of language. The Google Books Ngram viewer, for example, allows you to track the accrued outline over time of a shape of a word. When did “under way” become “underway”? You can check the history of a five-word phrase, such as “a good idea at the

time." Words and phrases by themselves are interesting. If you're a student of language, it can be addictive.

*Chronicle: You're currently teaching a course entitled, Digital Humanities: Readings in the Nineteenth Century. Why pair up these two subject areas?*

Hancher: Digital Humanities appeals to nineteenth century scholars in particular thanks to the large number of nineteenth-century materials that have been digitized in the past decade – fully available, without the copyright problem that afflicts most twentieth-century texts. The Bodleian Library in Oxford has contributed extensive digitized holdings from this period, and you see the libraries at Harvard, Stanford, UChicago contributing to this vast collection, which makes possible local discoveries and the analysis of large-scale patterns.

*Chronicle: But DH is not simply the digitization of texts, or the searching of texts. What are some of the large-scale projects that go beyond these more familiar functions?*

Hancher: Books that would have moldered and been forgotten on the library shelves have suddenly become available in digital form. Scholars such as Franco Moretti argue that we no longer need to rely on a small literary canon to frame our generalizations about literature, and that we can now take into account the noncanonical texts that make up most of the literary archive--the 95.5% of books that would get overlooked if they were only available in libraries. Beyond simply taking a second look at these forgotten texts, we now have access to metadata. We're able to consider and create new categories of analysis, and the example Moretti provides [in his article, "Style, Inc. Reflections on Seven Thousand Titles (British Novels, 1740-1850)"] is that of titles. Titles have their own history, it turns out. Their own rules, which change over time.

*Chronicle: What are some of the areas Digital Humanists are exploring that have yet to become common knowledge within the Humanities?*

Hancher: Author attribution, stylometry, influence analysis. Although authorship attribution is becoming a hot topic. If the corpus is large enough, if it has certain attributes, current methods of authorship attribution are highly effective. Some particularly well-known examples include projects on Shakespeare's corpus and the *Federalist Papers*. One interesting method involves attending what we call stop words, the mundane words we normally exclude from textual analysis, such as conjunctions and prepositions. Because authors aren't paying attention to them the way they are to nouns, verbs, and adjectives, they form a kind of fingerprint. Authors use them unconsciously, in a certain characteristic way, even if they're trying to remain anonymous. Other promising projects include visual mapping of themes, or crowd-sourcing the transcription of manuscripts and tagging of images. Many types of projects, very creative projects, have become possible in the last decade, and the scope of the projects will continue to evolve as new tools and uses emerge.

*Chronicle: What advice would you give to graduate students who are on the fence on whether or not to invest time in getting up to speed in this area?*

Hancher: This is an emerging field with room to explore. There are many ways to contribute. Some of the new uses that evolve, the new tools or methodologies, may be driven by graduate students and their research. In fact, graduate students may be heavily influential in shaping the future of this field due to their familiarity with the digital age. They're also opportunities for interdisciplinary projects--and that may be a road to funding, even at the graduate student level.

*Chronicle: That leads me to a related question. When researching for this article, some graduate students expressed a desire to contribute to*

*long-term projects, such as performing data entry for a crowd-sourced database, as a service to their field. However, such projects might not be seen as a CV-worthy accomplishment by a hiring committee, even though they may result in a valuable disciplinary resource. Do you think this attitude will change?*

Hancher: It may, but I doubt it will change anytime soon.

*Chronicle: Do you think job openings will appear for Digital Humanists, ones that specifically call for knowledge of this field?*

Hancher: As for jobs, it's difficult to say. One might pay attention to articles on Digital Humanities in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, particularly those that comment on its relation to the job market. The safest thing to say is that awareness of the new digital environment will be required in some sense. Even if it's not a credential on your CV, people who pay attention will be in a better position than those who don't; they'll gain access to new tools and texts. Any additional skill set can be advantageous in the hiring market, particularly in this new digital environment.

For a more detailed history of the relationship between the Humanities and the digital, see *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), particularly the article by Matthew Kirschenbaum, "What is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" Also see "The Rise of the Machines. NEH and the Digital Humanities: The Early Years" by Meredith Hindley, <http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/julyaugust/feature/the->

rise-the-machines. Also see Franco Moretti's, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61 (2000): 207–27 and "Style, Inc.: Reflection on 7,000 Titles (British Novels, 1740–1850)," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2009):134–58.