Defining Digital Humanities

Digital Humanities is a broad field of research and scholarly activity covering not only the use of digital methods by arts and humanities researchers and collaboration by Digital Humanities specialists with computing and scientific disciplines, but also the way in which the arts and humanities offer distinctive insights into the major social and cultural issues raised by the development of digital technologies. Work in this field is necessarily collaborative, involving multiple skills, disciplines and areas of expertise.

The use of computers to analyse research data in arts and humanities disciplines such as literature and history dates back to the 1940s. The University of Cambridge was a pioneer in the development of humanities computing, with the establishment in 1964 of the Literary and Linguistic Computing Centre under the chairmanship of Roy Wisbey. The emphasis in these early days was on the potential of the computer to facilitate the creating and sorting of large concordances and thesauri of historical texts. The work of pioneers such as Wisbey led to the growth during the 1970s and 1980s of an international community of specialists in humanities computing across a range of disciplines, who focused on the development of computational methods to accommodate the complex and varied structures found in the primary materials used by humanities scholars. This resulted in such achievements as the Text Encoding Initiative, used in preparing large machine-readable textual corpora, and innovative database structures such as the historical workstation κλειω (kleio) developed by Manfred Thaller in Germany. The 1980s also saw the establishment of international subject associations such as the Association for Computers and the Humanities (ACH) and the growth of a number of international conferences, most notably the ALLC/ACH conference, which developed into the major annual DH conference (the 2016 iteration of which had about 900 attendees from around the world).

The growth in the early 1990s of new network technologies, including the World Wide Web, and the increasing ease with which non-textual files such as images, sound and moving image could be created and shared led to a step change in the engagement of the arts and humanities with digital technologies. Major projects were established to produce large-scale digital editions and archives of texts and cultural artefacts from many different periods and civilisations. Libraries, archives and museums developed large-scale digitisation programmes to facilitate remote access to their collections, while commercial organisations such as Google also began to digitise large parts of the western cultural heritage. It became apparent, in the words of Jerome McGann, 'that the whole of our cultural inheritance has to be recurated and reedited in digital forms and institutional structures'. Moreover, this reconsideration of the relationship of humanities scholars to their primary materials was not restricted to digitisation but also involved the use of other technologies such as Geographic Information Systems or 3D visualisation. As the work of governments, writers and artists increasingly exists only in digital form, humanities scholars also began to be concerned with methods of curating and researching born-digital data.

In addressing such challenges and opportunities, humanities scholars have developed new collaborative and inter-disciplinary methods of working, and the term 'humanities computing' eventually appeared too narrow as a description of this field of endeavour. With the publication in 2004 of the *Blackwell Companion to Digital Humanities*, this term came to be preferred as a description of the increasingly varied and wide-ranging character of the field. The widespread acceptance of Digital Humanities as a convenient designation for the field was confirmed by the creation of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organisations (ADHO) in 2005 and the redesignation of the ALLC/ACH conference as DH in 2006. With the adoption of the term 'Digital Humanities', scholars working in the field have moved well beyond considering methods by which primary materials of humanities research can be analysed and disseminated in a digital form. An increasingly important element of the Digital Humanities is discussion of the way in which the digital landscape has changed our view of the humanities and, conversely, the insights that the humanities offer on such central issues of the digital age as

authenticity, memory, identity and authority. This has led to a sometimes uncertain engagement with media and cultural theory.

Many successful Digital Humanities centres were established internationally in the 1980s such as those (to take only British examples) at King's College London, Queen's University Belfast, University of Sheffield and University of Glasgow. There has recently been very rapid growth in Digital Humanities centres as the result of initiatives such as the creation of an Office of Digital Humanities by the National Endowment for the Humanities in the USA. The CenterNet alliance of DH centres currently has over 220 members. However, the institutional and funding structure of these centres varies, and McGann has described these institutional arrangements as a 'haphazard, inefficient, and often jerry-built arrangement of intra-mural instruments – freestanding centres, labs, enterprises and institutes, or special digital groups set up outside the traditional departmental structure of the University'. These centres are often dependent on uncertain soft research funding, but nevertheless provide a clear institutional focus for information and advice on Digital Humanities. In general, Digital Humanities has not resulted in the creation of academic departments, although there are some notable exceptions.