

# Melissa Terras' Blog

Adventures in Digital Humanities and digital cultural heritage. Plus some musings on academia.

Saturday, 10 July 2010

## DH2010 Plenary: Present, Not Voting: Digital Humanities in the Panopticon

*This is an approximation of what I plan – or hope – to say in my closing plenary speech at Digital Humanities 2010 at King's College London, June 2010. I'm not one for reading off prewritten speeches, however, so expect diversions and ad-libs in the recorded speech. I wanted to write a written record for those in the discipline who could not attend, or who were busy keeping their seats in the pub for the World Cup semi final.*

(ps. I'll go back in the future and put the links in to the tweets, for verification purposes)

### Preamble, the First.

Firstly, let me say how honoured I am to have been asked to be the plenary speaker at DH2010. I understand that this is a deviation from previous conferences – for the first time, instead of getting someone external to the community to talk about semi-related research areas, they've asked someone from well within the discipline to present. I'm aware that, in a room that holds 250 people, there are 249 people other than myself who are more than qualified to stand up for an hour and say what they currently think of the Digital Humanities (not to mention the other 200 folks registered for the conference who may be watching from the streaming lecture theatre). It's also worth saying that I am incredibly nervous. Many of those in the audience are close colleagues, many are good friends. This is not a conference I can walk away from and forget a disastrous presentation. I'm very aware that the rules of giving plenary speeches have changed as rapidly as the information environment over the last few years. I remember a plenary at ALLC/ACH (as the conference was then known) ten or so years ago where the speaker read out a chapter of their book, never looking up at the audience once, and with no concession given for the change of presentational mode: "As I said on page 39. As I will discuss in chapter five..." Nowadays, given that I'm being recorded and simultaneously broadcast online, that just won't cut it. You expect more. As well as being , I'm aware that I'm being #nervous. Many of you will already have tweeted comments about what I've said online, even though I've not really begun yet. That's fine, and I'm not looking for any special treatment. I just want you to be aware that I'm aware that these are changed days. I don't know how I'm being watched and perceived, as much as you don't know what I'm going to say next. In fact, surveillance is just one of the things I want to talk to you about today.

### Preamble the Second

For those of you who don't know me, I'm from University College London, just a mile north from King's. UCL and King's were both founder members of the University of London in 1836, and the two Universities have an interesting, competitive history. UCL was set up as a secular educational establishment, letting in anyone who could pay the fees (such as Gandhi. And Women.) whereas King's was set up as an Anglican church based institution, in reaction to the "Great Goddess of Gower Street" threatening to allow education to all just up the road. The two institutions have remained locked in friendly – but sometimes fierce – competitive mode, ever since. A recent Provost's newsletter from UCL ran with its most important headline that UCL had beaten King's in the rugby varsity match 22-0. On the academic front, we are often competing for the same staff, students, grants, even facilities. UCL has recently established its Centre for Digital Humanities, which forms a competitive alternative to the teaching and research that has been established at King's Centre for Computing in the Humanities (soon to be the Department of Digital Humanities). And so it goes on. We're proud at UCL of the different nature of our University. As opposed to King's, we never will have a theology department, and do not provide a place of worship on campus. Much of the founding principles of UCL were influenced by the Jurist, Philosopher, and legal and social reformer, Jeremy Bentham who believed in equality, animal rights, utilitarianism, and welfarism. UCL special collections host 60,000 folios of Bentham's letters and manuscripts, many of which have not been transcribed. Upon his death, Bentham's skeleton was preserved as an "Auto-icon" (a two fingers up to those who believed in religion and the need for a Christian funeral) which now sits, dressed in his favourite outfit,

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I'm the Professor of Digital Humanities in the [Department of Information Studies, University College London](#), and Director of [UCL Centre for Digital Humanities](#). I teach Digitisation, and Web Publishing, and my research focuses on the use of computational techniques to enable research in the humanities that would otherwise be impossible. [My UCL webpage](#) contains more information about publications and research projects. I also hang out at [@melissaterras](#). This is my personal blog, and everything I say here is in a personal capacity.


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### Essential Reading

- [UCL Centre for Digital Humanities](#)
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- [John Naughton's Blog](#)
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in the cloisters at UCL. There is an oft repeated story that Bentham's body is wheeled into Senate meetings, although he is noted in the minutes as "Present, not Voting".

You will notice that in early colour photos, you can still see Bentham's real preserved head at the base of the Auto-Icon. This has been stored in Special Collections ever since 1975, when (the story goes) students from King's stole it, merrily kicked it around the quad, and then held it to ransom. Friendly competition, indeed.

### Introduction

Time to draw this properly back to Digital Humanities and the plenary in question. One of Bentham's main interests was penal reform, and he is perhaps most famous for his design of the Panopticon, a prison which allowed jailors to observe (-opticon) all (pan-) prisoners without the incarcerated being able to tell whether they are being watched. This psychologically, and physically, brutal prison was never built, but the concept has lived on as metaphor, influencing a wide range of artists, writers, and theorists, including George Orwell (who worked in room 101 of Senate House, in-between UCL and King's, and would have been well aware of Jeremy Bentham's work) and Foucault. Indeed, the Panopticon can be taken as a metaphor for western society, and increasingly, online communication, particularly social media. Every time you tweet, do you know who is paying attention? What audience are we performing for, and can you be sure you are in control of how our actions are viewed and used?

Now, I cannot pretend to be an omnipresence that has been watching all that has been happening in the Digital Humanities over the past few months. But when you are asked to do a plenary speech such as this, believe me, you start to pay attention to things. You do your homework. I've been peering into the twittersphere panopticon and wondering what to say. Which will be the following:

- I'm going to talk briefly about the Transcribe Bentham project, as a type of Digital Humanities project that can objectively demonstrate the changes that are occurring in our field at the moment.
- I'm going to use this project as a window to peer at current issues in Digital Humanities – or at least things that I've learnt from the project – and the wider community – over the past few months.
- And finally, I'm going to set you all homework based on the key things that are emerging in our field. Friendly competition is not so friendly just now. There are tough times ahead for academia, given the current financial crisis and promised cutbacks. What can we learn from the areas highlighted by this discussion, and what can we do better as a field, so those who are looking at us (and believe me, managers and administrators and financial experts are looking at us) can visibly see what we are up to?

### Transcribe Bentham

Transcribe Bentham is a one year, Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project, housed under the auspices of the Bentham Project at UCL (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/>). The Bentham Project aims to produce new editions of the scholarship of Jeremy Bentham, and so far twelve volumes of Bentham's correspondence have been published by the Bentham Project, plus various collections of his work on jurisprudence and legal matters (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/Publications/index.htm>). However, there is much more work to be done to make his writings more accessible, and to provide transcripts of the materials therein. Although a previous grant from the AHRC in 2003-6 has allowed for the completion of a catalogue of the manuscripts held within UCL (<http://www.benthampapers.ucl.ac.uk/>), and transcriptions have been completed of some 10,000 folios (currently stored in MS Word...), there are many hours of work that need to be invested in reading, transcribing, labelling, and making accessible the works of this interdisciplinary historical figure if they are to be analysed, consulted, and utilised by scholars across the various disciplines interested in Bentham's writings.


Crowdsourcing - the harnessing of online activity to aid in large scale projects that require human cognition - is becoming of interest to those in the library, museum and cultural heritage industry, as institutions seek ways to publically engage their online communities, as well as aid in creating useful and usable digital resources. As one of the first cultural and heritage projects to apply crowdsourcing to a non-trivial task, UCL's Bentham Project has recently set up the "Transcribe Bentham" initiative; an ambitious, open source, participatory online environment which is being developed to aid in transcribing 10,000 folios of Bentham's handwritten documents. To be launched in August 2010, this experimental project will aim to engage with individuals such as school children, amateur historians, and other interested parties, who can provide time to help us read Bentham's manuscripts. The integration of user communities will be key to the success of the project, and an additional project remit is to monitor the success of trying to engage the wider community with such documentary material: will we get high quality, trustworthy transcriptions as a result of this work? Will people be interested in volunteering their time and effort to read the (poor) handwriting of a great philosopher? What technical and pragmatic difficulties will we run into? How can we monitor success in a crowdsourced environment?

One of the other things that is interesting about the Bentham Project, and the Transcribe Bentham initiative, it is demonstrates neatly the progression of Digital Humanities in historical manuscript based projects. The Bentham Project has been primarily occupied with print output, gaining a web presence in the mid 1990s, then an online database of the Bentham archive in the early 20th Century, and is now carrying out a moderately large scale digitisation project to scan in Bentham's writings for Transcribe Bentham. In addition, the Bentham Project has gone from a simple web page, to interactive Web 2.0 environment, from MS Word to TEI encoded XML texts, and from relatively

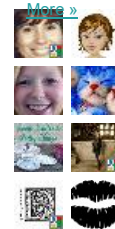
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  - ▶ [October](#) (2)
  - ▶ [September](#) (4)
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DH2010 Plenary: Present, Not Voting:  
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inward looking academic project to an outward facing, community- building exercise. We can peer at Digital Humanities through this one project, and see the transformative aspects that technologies have had on our working practices, and the practices of those working in the historical domain.

### Transcribe Bentham, and Emerging Issues in DH

I could talk about crowdsourcing for an entire hour, but I thought it would be more useful to point out to those involved in the Digital Humanities community some of the emergent issues that I have found myself tackling whilst engaging in the Transcribe Bentham project. It's certainly true that for every project that you work on you learn new things about the field, and over the past year various aspects of DH research and issues that concern the DH community have raised their head.

I'm going now to talk about some of these issues, backing it up with some observations of what has been happening in the DH community, through conversations that others have been having on Twitter. Forgive me if you just think I'm a stalker. A lot of these issues are becoming more visible in the DH community, so I'm going to quote you on those.

#### 1. Our Dependence on Primary Sources, Our Dependence on Modern Technology

I've never felt more of a Jack of all trades, master of none working on Transcribe Bentham. And it's great. Let's be clear – The Bentham Project belongs to Professor Philip Schofield, who has been working on it for over 25 years. I've just been drafted in to help bridge the gap between primary sources, dedicated scholars, and new technology. On the one hand, I'm utterly dependent on scholars who know less than me about IT, and more than me about their subject domain, to make an academic contribution. On the other, I'm utterly dependent on some programmers who have the time to work up the ideas we have for TB into a complex (but seemingly simple!) working environment for transcribing documents, in just a few months. I'd be lost without access to historical knowledge and source material, but I'd be lost without access to new, online cutting edge, technologies.

This is something I see repeated across our discipline. When Ray Siemens tweets "Among many highlights of an excellent week, holding a well-read copy of Thynne's 1532 Chaucer, as well as an iPad..." we get the joy. When Brian Croxall tweets "Gah, can't get online at this hotel" we feel his frustration at being cut off from a service and an environment which is becoming as essential to us as running water or Oxygen. When Bethany Nowvieskie tweets "Dreamed last night that my #DH2010 poster was a set of flexible, give away, interactive touchscreens. Maybe not too far in the future" we nod in recognition, and go, yeah... that would be cool... let me Google that and see if they exist... We exist in this parallel state where we are looking towards humanities research, and computational technology, and it can be immensely rewarding, and great fun. I'm really enjoying working on Transcribe Bentham. I really enjoy the duality of DH research (as long as I can get online when I want).

#### 2. Legacy Data

But as well as working with historical documents (or artefacts, or whatever), it's becoming increasingly common with the Digital Humanities that we have to work with historical digital documents – or legacy data, left over from the not-so-distant past, in different formats and structures that need bringing into current thinking on best practice with Digital data. This can take immense amounts of work. Converting 10,000 transcribed Bentham documents from MS Word to TEI compliant XML, with any granularity of markup, is not a trivial task. Linking these transcripts with the records currently held in the online database, and then UCL's library record system (to deal with usability and sustainability issues) is not a trivial task. Linking existing transcriptions with any digitised images of the writings which exist is not a trivial task. Transcribe Bentham, then, is dealing with sorting its own ducks into a row, as well as undertaking new and novel research.

Most of us understand this, and we understand just how much work (and cost) is involved in continually ensuring we are maintaining and updating our work and our records to make sure that our digital resources can continue to be used. So we understand that a seemingly simple tweet by Tom Elliot saying "more BAtlas legacy data added to Pleiades today, courtesy of @sgillies <http://bit.ly/dBuYFg>" belies an incredible amount of work to ensure to convert and maintain an existing resource. As well as looking forward to the future, and new technologies, us DH peoples must be our own archivists.

#### 3. Sustainability

Which brings me to the thorny issue of sustainability. We hope with Transcribe Bentham that the project will continue far beyond its one year remit, but there are some decisions to make with that regard. Will the user forums, and user contributions, continue to be monitored and moderated if we can't afford a staff member to do so? Will the wiki get locked down at the close of funding or will we leave it to its own devices, becoming an online-free-for all? We are at the stage, in a one-year-project, where we already need to be applying for future funding, before we have even got anything to demonstrate that its worth continuing our funding (and there is no guarantee in the current climate that any funding will be forthcoming, see below). But we are lucky in Transcribe Bentham – its father project, the Bentham Project, will continue whatever happens, under the watchful auspices of Philip Schofield. So when Dan Cohen is quoted, by Shane Landrum, in a tweet that reminds us "Being a labour of love is often the best sustainability model" we understand what that means. Sustainability is an area of huge concern for the DH community, and is going to become more so as financial issues get more complex.

- ▶ April (7)
- ▶ March (5)
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- ▶ January (6)
- ▶ 2009 (66)
- ▶ 2008 (101)
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#### 4. Digital Identity

Transcribe Bentham is going to live or die by its digital identity and digital presence. It doesn't have any equivalent in the offline world. It is what it is: an online place to hang out and help Transcribe some documents, should that take your fancy. To be a success, then, our functionality, digital presence, and digital identity need to be absolutely spot on. Ironically, I've never worked on a Digital Humanities project before where the digital presence mattered so much, and I've come to realise that we all should be taking our digital identity and digital presence a lot more seriously. It's not enough just to whack up a website and say "that'll do, now back to writing books". If we are going to be in the business of producing digital resources, we have to be able to excel at producing digital resources, and be conscious of our digital identity and digital presence.

We are lucky at Transcribe Bentham to have gained the input of one of my PhD students, Rudolf Ammann (@rkammann) who is also a gifted graphic designer. He has taken it upon himself to whip both UCL Centre for Digital Humanities, and Transcribe Bentham, into online shape, whilst designing logos for us which are both fitting, useful, and memorable. We're being careful with TB to roll our presence out over twitter and Facebook to try and encourage interaction. We hope that someone will be watching.

Suddenly, it matters in a way that didn't matter before, if people are looking at our website and our resource. I believe that digital presence and digital identity is becoming more important to Digital Humanities as a discipline. So when Amanda French jokily tweets "I feel like a got a rejection letter yesterday from @DHNow when too few RTed my "binary hero" post <http://bit.ly/aKpBiX>" we understand the complexity of interacting in the new digital environment: we want the discourse, and want the attention (and if you don't know what DHNow is, you should be reading it every day). Likewise when Matt Kirschenbaum tweets "Has Twitter done more as DH infrastructure than any dedicated effort to date?" and this is immediately retweeted by Tim Sherratt with an addendum "[For me it has!]" we understand the possibilities that are afforded with new modes of online communication. How we can harness this properly for Transcribe Bentham remains to be seen – but we are at least aware we need to make the effort.

#### 5. Embracing the Random, Embracing the Open

There are large differences between producing a perfect (or near as perfect as can be) print edition of Bentham's letters, and learning to deal with the various levels of quality of input we will be getting with Transcribe Bentham. There are large differences between working in a close knit group of scholars, to working with the general public. There are also differences in producing online editions and sources which you are willing to open up to other uses – and one of the things we want to do with Transcribe Bentham is to provide access to the resulting XML files so that others can reuse the information (via web-services, etc). The hosting and transcription environment we are developing will be open source, so that others can use it. And this sea change, from working in small groups, to really reaching out to users is something we have to embrace, and learn to work with. We also have to give up on ideas of absolute perfection, and go for broader projects, embracing input from a wider audience, and the chaos that ensues. So we understand when Dan Cohen tweets "Another leitmotif I'm sensing: as academics, we need to get over our obsession w/ perfect, singular, finished, editorial vols". Bring it. Let's see what happens...

#### 6. Impact

I only realised recently that my automatic reaction to getting involved with the Transcribe Bentham project was "how can I get from this some output that counts for me". We wrote into the grant bid a period of user testing and feedback, and one of the reasons is to get a few pretty much guaranteed publications out of the project, looking at the success – or not! – or crowdsourcing in cultural heritage projects. Get few academic outputs in there, then we can go and play online, and not have to worry too much about how creating an open source tool, or reaching out to a potential audience of thousands, will "count" in the academic world. Because no matter how successful Transcribe Bentham, the "impact" will be felt in the same usual way – through publications. This is a nonsense, but it's part of the academic game, and is becoming of increasing frustration to those working in the Digital Humanities. It's not enough to make something that is successful and interesting and well used: you have to write a paper about it that gets published in the Journal of Successful Academic Stuff to make that line on your CV count, and to justify your time spent on the project. So we understand the frustration felt by Stephen Ramsay when he puts a mini-documentary online which goes as viral as things really get in the Digital Humanities, viewed by thousands of people, which will have no real impact on his career: "I've published some print articles. Funny thing though: None of them were read by 2000 people in the space of 2 weeks .... had their titles printed on t-shirts, or resulted in dozens of emails from adoring fans. So why am I writing journal articles again? .... Oh wait, nevermind, my department doesn't count movies."

#### 7. Routes to Jobs

This is a tricky one. Should those hired in Digital Humanities projects to do technical work have a PhD in Digital Humanities – even if the tasks in the role are service level (such as marking up TEI) and don't require that academic training? I'm willing to admit that Transcribe Bentham walked right into the storm with this one when our job adverts for our two RAs went up. We advertised for two postdocs: one with a historical background that had experience working in the Bentham studies area, one with TEI chops to help us with the back end of the system. We specified that we wanted PhDs because of the changed rules in employment at Universities in the UK (well, at least those involved in the common pay framework): if we had advertised for posts at non-PhD level, we wouldn't have been

able to employ someone with a PhD, even if they wanted to work for less money, because of the spine point system. So, we advertise for two postdocs, and if someone good comes through without a PhD, we can employ them on a lower rate. But we forgot to mention that applications from those without a PhD may also be considered. Cue much online discussion in various forums.

We get this frustration. Dot Porter said, on Facebook rather than twitter, "I get annoyed when I read job postings for positions that require a PhD, and then read the job description and can't figure out why. Maybe I'm sensitive, not having a PhD? Is a PhD really required for one to take part in the digital humanities these days, even in supporting (non-research) roles?"

This is becoming a real issue in Digital Humanities. There is no clear route to an academic job, and no clear route to PhD, and there are a lot of people at a high level in the field who do not have PhDs. Yet increasingly, we expect the younger intake to have gone down that route, and then to work in service level roles (partly because there are few academic jobs). It remains to be seen how we can address this. In Transcribe Bentham, we changed the advert to make it clear we accepted applications from non-PhDs. In the end we did appoint two post-docs, but at least we made it clear that people had the option to apply for a job where, ostensibly, you didn't need a PhD, just the skill set, to undertake the task properly.

#### 8. Young Scholars

This problem of employment and career and progression taps into a general frustration for young scholars in our field. It can be hard to get a foothold, and hard to get a job (not just in Digital Humanities – in the UK over 15% of graduates under the age of 25 are currently unemployed. It's a tough time to be coming out of university, PhD or no PhD). Perhaps it's always difficult to make the transition from academic student to academic Academic, but twitter amplifies the issues that are facing young scholars in the field trying to make headway. I was very aware when hiring for Transcribe Bentham that there were some very good candidates out there who just weren't getting a break (the person who came second in the interview, and who we would have employed instantly had we had two historical post-doc positions, later told me that he had had over 20 interviews, but we were the first people to give him any feedback). We shouldn't forget the pressure young scholars are under (at a time when we are complaining of the financial pressures that us paid academics are under) and how difficult it can be for them on both a professional and personal level. It makes me sad to hear tweets like the one from Ryan Cordell saying "Just wrote a tough email withdrawing from #DH2010. Even if I got a bursary, I just couldn't swing it in the same summer as our move #sigh".

#### 9. Economic Downturn

Which brings me to the next doom and gloom point. When Brett Bobbley tweets "Two weeks ago, no one in my kid's school had Silly Bandz; now they all wear them. How come higher ed never moves that fast?" we all chuckle at the thought of the academy as being a reactive, immediate place to be. It takes a few years for the impact of outside events to trickle down. It's only now that the economic downturn is starting to hit Higher Education. In the UK, cuts over the next few years are predicted to be anything between 25% to 40%, depending on what leak or rumour or Governmental minister you believe. These are uncertain times for research, and for institutions, and for individuals, and for projects. We don't know if there will be money to even apply for to continue the research and application in the Transcribe Bentham project. We don't know, even if we submit an application, that the funding council won't suddenly reject all applications due to their funding cuts. We don't know how to make an economic case for projects in the Arts, Humanities, Heritage, and Culture, so that when panjandrum and apparatchiks are deciding which swinging cut to make next, we can display our relevance, our impact, the point of our existence, and why people should keep writing the cheques. These are uncertain times. How this is affecting Digital Humanities is slowly beginning to be played out.

#### 10. Money, The Humanities, and Job Security

I feel that it would be morally wrong of me to come to a conference at King's that has the word Humanities in the title and not broach the subject of what had happened over the past year to the Humanities at King's. Palaeography is a subject close to my heart, and as @DrGnosis tweeted during the opening speech of #DH2010, "I weep for Palaeography". I also like to think that had any one of the 420 other registered conference attendees from the Digital Humanities community been asked to give this plenary that they would have the guts to raise this issue. But I am guest here and do not want to be rude or impolite. So I'll repeat what was tweeted by John Theibault: "There's going to be a bit of a pall over dh2010 because of all that's gone on with KCL". And I recommend if you do not understand what I am talking about, then you read about it, and understand how little respect was given to Humanities academics at Kings over the past year from their management. And I suggest you hope that your own management have not been taking notes, and do not proceed in a similar fashion, for what hope is there then for the Humanities?

It's very difficult for those in the Humanities to make the economic case for their existence, and that is what we are being expected to do in the current climate. We need to be able to explain why projects like Transcribe Bentham are relevant, and important and useful. Those in the humanities are historically bad at doing this, and those in DH are no different. But DH is different from traditional humanities research: on the plus side, we should be able to articulate the transferable skill set that comes with DH research, that can educate and influence a wide range of culture, heritage, creative, and even business processes. On the downside, projects like Transcribe Bentham are more expensive than paying one individual scholar for a year to write their scholarly tome on, say, Byzantine Sigillography – the digital equivalent will require researchers, computer programmers,

computer kit, digitisation costs, etc. To ensure that the Digital Humanities are funded at the time when funding is being withdrawn from the Humanities, we need to be prepared, and to articulate and explain why what we do is important, and relevant.

#### 11. Fears for the Future.

Of course, it's not just the Humanities that are in a perilous financial state: in the UK, it's the whole of the sector. At King's, it's not just Humanities that have taken the hit, but also the Engineering Faculty. Profitable groups from disciplines such as Computer Science have been poached wholesale by other Universities (not so friendly competition now, is it?). And this is a pattern we are seeing across the Universities in the UK. We're all scared; for the continuation of our projects (such as Transcribe Bentham), for our students, for our young scholars on temporary contracts, for our "research profile" (whatever that may mean) and for our own jobs. We understand the implicit horror in a tweet such as that from Simon Tanner saying "England next? Plan to close smaller #Welsh #Universities broadly welcomed by #education professionals. <http://bit.ly/dxWBSj> #HE #wales."

If we think that no-one is watching us and making value judgements about our community, our research, our relevance, and our output, then we are misguided. It's not just other scholars who are paying attention, but those who hold the purse strings – who often have no choice but to make brutal cuts. The Humanities are one of the easiest targets, given scholar's reluctance or inability to make the case for themselves. I'm reminded of a phrase from Orwell's 1984, and what happened to society when under the horrific pressure and surveillance within. Allow me to paraphrase: if we are not prepared, and if we are not careful, these cuts will be "a boot stamping on the face of the humanities, forever". I remember very strongly that at the end of an upbeat DH2009 Neil Fraistat stood up and said "The Digital Humanities have arrived!". But in 2010, the place we have arrived to is a changed landscape, and not nearly as optimistic. We are not in Kansas now, Toto.

#### Digital Humanities in the Panopticon

So let us pretend that we are someone from outside our community, watching the goings on in academia and making value judgements, and financial judgements, about our discipline and field. How does Digital Humanities itself hold up when under scrutiny? How do we fair with the crucial aspects of Digital Identity, Impact, and Sustainability?

The answer is – not very well. From the outside looking in, we look amateur. We should know and understand best, amongst many academic fields, how important it is to maintain and sustain our digital presence and our community. But our web presence, across the associations, sucks. The ACH website says it was last updated in 2003. The ALLC web site is a paean to unnecessary white space. SDH/SEMI is not so bad, but has its own problems with navigation and presentation (I'm including it here so as not to leave out a whole association) – but the ADHO website is a prime example of what happens when Wikis are not wiki-ed. These are our outward faces. These are our representations of the field. We've been slow to embrace other social media and new technologies when we are the field that is supposed to show how it is done.

But what you may not know is that the associations have recently taken this on board. There is a lot of hard work going on behind the scenes on all accounts, so I don't want to lay into folks too badly on this. A wireframe of the new ADHO site, which should be up and running shortly, demonstrates that we are moving into the 21st Century, finally. What's interesting is the big space for a mission statement, and a definition of the field (which we at DH don't have, yet!). We need to take our digital presence more seriously, and to embrace the potentials that we all know about, but haven't pitched in to help represent for the discipline.

What about impact? We've been historically bad at articulating our relevance and our successes and our impact beyond our immediate community (and sometimes within our immediate community – it surprised me recently when a leading scholar in the field was told, via twitter, of the role the DH community had in the formulation of XML, and he hadn't heard of this before). We're bad at knowing our own history, as a discipline, and having examples listed off the top of our heads of why our research community is required in today's academe.

As for sustainability, we should know best among many fields of the importance of preservation of our discipline's heritage. Yet it's only been recently that scholars in the field have started to note the disappearance of abstracts from previous conferences, websites which have disappeared overnight, the fact we don't have, and can't locate, a complete back run of the journals printed by the associations. For example, we don't have any of the image files included in the ALLC/ACH 2000 abstract book. We need to look after our heritage: no-one else will. What you may not know, again, is that a few people are working behind the scenes to try and build up digital copies of our discipline's history, and hopefully over the next year or so we'll see this available online. We need to be leading the way in the humanities for publishing and maintaining and sustaining our discipline, to demonstrate that, yes, we really do know what we are talking about. At the moment, it looks like we don't.

Why does all this matter? I bring you back to the title of my talk: "Present, not Voting: Digital Humanities in the Panopticon". Our community matters (although heck, a lot of you are not voting – for the ACH and ALLC elections, turnout was around 30%. We need new blood in the associations. We need people who are not just prepared to whine but prepared to roll up their sleeves and do things to improve our associations, our community, and our presence in academia.) But the fact of the matter remains: if we do not treat our research presence seriously, if we are not prepared to stick up for Digital Humanities, if we are not prepared to demonstrate our relevance and our excellence and our achievements, then the status of those working within DH (including the relevance of digital scholarship, and how it is treated by those in the Humanities) will not improve, and we'll be as

impotent as we have ever been. We should be demonstrating excellence and cohesion and strength in numbers. We should be prepared, as best we can, for whatever is coming next in the financial downturn, and in academia. If we self identify as Digital Humanists – and I presume many of those here at the conference would – then we need to articulate what that means, and what's the point of our community. It's the only way to prepare for what is coming.

Homework

So far, so doom and gloom. But we are a community who are full of those who like to do things, and make things, and achieve things. And there are plenty of practical things we can do to ensure both the continuation of our individual careers, our individual projects (such as Transcribe Bentham), our centres, and our teaching.

For the individual, we can be prepared by having at the tip of our tongues what we do and why we matter and why we should be supported and why DH makes sense. (Those definitions of DH must be personal, and must vary – but how many of us, when asked to explain DH, go “well, its kinda the intersection of....” – and you lost them at kinda). We need to have thought about the impact of our work, and why it is relevant. When asked, or queried, about this (either in a personal or professional setting) we should know. And it really doesn't hurt to have learnt a little about the background of our field, and its impact, and its successes, so we can throw in a few “for examples” when the blue-sky nature of research pays off, and for when the application of our research in the wider community works, and for some major problems that need to be solved about digital culture and use and tools and why we are the people to do it.

Individuals can find support in networks of scholars, and become active in communities (both DH and individual subject organisations): there is strength in numbers. Individuals can take their digital identity seriously – let's show other scholars and other disciplines how best to proceed. We need to learn to play the academic game with regard to publications, though, and ensure all of our wonderful whizz bangy tools are equally as followed up with research papers in important places, which is a bit of a bind, but the only way with which to maintain and improve our academic credentials at present. Individuals can promote and be the advocates for DH, and for DH based research. We can also ensure that we support the younger cohort and students and young scholars who are just entering our field: it's our role to be ambassadors for DH in every way we can.

For those individuals who do have some management sway and some management clout, there is also plenty that can be done to push forward the Digital Humanities agenda, within departments and institutions. More support and kudos can be given to digital scholarship and digital outputs within the humanities, and this becomes something that can be raised and pushed within institutional committee structures, to ensure they count for hiring and promotion and tenure. (Indeed, established devoted tenure track posts for Digital Humanities scholars may be something those in the states could work towards). Issues of funding and employment for young scholars in the discipline should be watched out for, including the PhD and hiring/ qualification issue, but this is something that can be tackled through careful, watchful leadership. My main advice to those in DH management, though, would be to ensure you fully embed your activities within institutional infrastructures: become indispensable. Get involved with academic departments and service areas. Provide advisory services and engage with as wide a spectrum as people within your institution as you can. Be ready to defend your staff and your projects in the current financial climate, and be forewarned.

There is also strength in numbers in management, in local, regional, national, and international communities. Collaborations should be entered into, rather than competition, to further imbed projects and people into the wider academic field. Strategies and policies should be developed to deal with the coming hardships that face us.

From an institutional point of view, building up a centralised record of all the individuals and projects involved in DH within an institution can facilitate new research, and build on existing strengths to make it clear where new research opportunities may lie. I would suggest that DH centres should integrate closely with library systems (and iSchools). Institutions can also support digital outputs as being research in the internal promotion of individual scholars. The establishment of teaching programs (such as the new UCL Centre for Digital Humanities MA in Digital Humanities) provides essential training for young scholars entering our field, and institutions should look to the opportunities which exist in providing this graduate level training – which is sorely needed in our field. Institutions can also encourage collaboration with other institutions, and provide facilities, for example, for visiting scholars, to encourage cross-fertilisation of teaching and research ideas.

The ADHO organisations can also do plenty to maintain and support research, teaching, and the DH community. Our digital presence should be (and is being) sorted out as a matter of urgency. Within those digital resources, ADHO and its constituent organisations should provide the community with the ammunition which is necessary to defend DH at a relevant, useful, successful research field. Information about the successes of DH can be pushed, including projects and initiatives that have been important to both our and other communities. The value and impact of DH can be documented and presented. A register of good projects can also be maintained. Best practice in the running of projects and centres can be pushed, and advice given to those who need it in all matters DH. Collaboration should be encouraged, and the associations should continue the work they are doing in supporting young scholars. If anyone has any further ideas, then please do contact the associations. They are there to help you.

My suggestions for funding agencies are relatively succinct – I am not sure how much leeway they have in providing funds at the moment, although it is worth saying that certain funders (more than others) have been and are being very supportive to DH, and are engaged with and listening to our community. We need financial support, both to carry out blue sky research, and to build DH

infrastructures. Funding agencies can also help with the sustainability of projects, and in wrapping up and archiving projects. They can aid, encourage, and facilitate collaboration, and graduate research. Considering the large investment that has been made in DH, particularly over the past ten to fifteen years, it makes sense for them to continue supporting us to ensure our research comes to fruition, although we are all very aware of the changed financial academic world in which we live.

### Wrapping up

This has been an honest tour of what DH means to me, and some of the issues which DH is presented with at the moment. It's been necessarily negative in places. But I hope I have left you with the feeling that there is proactive activity which we, as individuals, departments, institutions, organisations, and agencies can take to further entrench ourselves in the humanities pantheon and to demonstrate that we really are indispensable to the humanities.

I don't know what is going to happen with Transcribe Bentham, whether the project itself will be a success, or whether we'll still have a funded project to talk about in a year's time, but for me it is part of the learning curve to distil and understand how our current research aims fit into the current academic framework.

One thing I do know, is that I think that Jeremy Bentham would have loved the fact that a picture of his manky embalmed head was being broadcast on a giant screen at King's College London (especially when involved with a speech that raises issues about KCL!). I've really enjoyed having the chance to talk to you about my thoughts about Transcribe Bentham, and the Digital Humanities in general. A rough transcript of this talk will be posted to my blog. Thank you for listening in person, and see you on Twitter, in the Panopticon.

Posted by [Melissa](#) at 17:06

## 2 comments:

 [lorna said...](#)

Melissa, thank you for posting your wonderful talk. I'm sorry I couldn't be there, but I really enjoyed reading the text here!

Just one thing: [www.arts-humanities.net](http://www.arts-humanities.net) contains a list of digital arts and humanities projects (mostly UK, and funded by AHRC and JISC). We just got the very exciting news that the project can continue until the end of the year, and during this time we are going to develop the focus so that it demonstrates much more clearly the use and impact of these digital projects.

Gathering the evidence of value of digital research in the arts and humanities is something that I've been passionate about since the Methods Network, and I completely agree with you that we must build a more visible evidence base for the value of digital scholarship in the arts and humanities.

[11 July 2010 15:32](#)

 [stevenmarcrhodes said...](#)

Great talk Melissa.

Just to confirm, however, a neutral bystander might look at the words

"UCL was set up as a secular educational establishment, letting in anyone who could pay the fees (such as Gandhi. And Women.) whereas King's was set up as an Anglican church based institution, in reaction to the "Great Godless of Gower Street" threatening to allow education to all just up the road."

...and conclude that King's was more restrictive in its student intake at its foundation than UCL. This is not the case. King's was, from its foundation, open to students of all beliefs and none and was not a 'Test Acts' school. It was this decision which, at least in part, prompted Wellington's duel over the founding of King's and his support for catholic emancipation. Indeed King's College became the first London medical school to admit women.

[20 July 2010 16:54](#)

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