A Historiographical Analysis of Digital History

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Over the last two decades, the advancement and implementation of computers in academia has transformed the way that scholars record, store, and transfer information. These functions, however, only constitute a small sample of the ways in which various professions have used computers to bolster efficiency. Technology has revolutionized the ways in which traditional methods have been approached, as well as provided a much larger pool of professional interaction. In the historical community the implementation of technology within traditional methods of information gathering and sharing has been met with zeal and, in the same instance, caution. Digital history and the digital humanities are realms in which technology has promoted rapid changes in the way that historians conduct research, and also enables peer interaction. It also provides a medium by which mass audiences can consume academic works, such as textbooks and articles. Although these examples only touch the surface of the ways in which technology is evolving the historical profession, they serve as a strong basis from which we can examine in depth the ways in which such changes have transformed the outlook for the historical profession's future.

Much of the confusion that surrounds digital history is the lack of agreement over what the true definition is. For instance, digital history encompasses elements of the storage of information, methodologies, and frameworks yet it cannot be clearly defined as either one or the other by definition. Digital history can be a means for a historian to find primary sources in an online database, save and record pertinent data to their research goals, and format their project using a multimedia program that implements mediums such as audio and video, enhancing their manuscript or presentation.

One example of this is the creation and construction of digital textbooks. In Roy Rosenzweig's, *Clio Wired: The Future of the Past in the Digital Age*, several authors write about the current models of implementation of digital history mediums, such as digital textbooks, within active learning methods for students of history. Rosenzweig's book touches upon the growing uses for educators, such as implementing digital resources into their lessons in order to enhance the learning experience of their students through active engagement.[1] In addition to detailing the processes in which digital mediums can be applied in a history classroom, Rosenzweig includes articles that also push into other avenues of exploration and concern within digital history. This includes segments detailing the use of hypertext within academic articles, whether or not access to electronic materials should be free, and the collection and consolidation of historical information online. These aspects of digital history have the historical profession debating issues regarding what these outlets and methods could mean for the discipline. For example, in 2005 historians raised questions about the unrestricted access to historical journals in lieu of the of the National Institutes of Health urging NIH funded researchers to make their peer reviewed journals available for free online.[2] Such measures made historians, many of whom receive grants from sources such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, wonder whether or not they would be forced to put their work into free public databases.

In a second article by David Berry, "The Computational Turn: Thinking about the Digital Humanities," readers are encouraged to explore how the digital humanities have revolutionized the way that knowledge is produced and transferred. Berry argues that in the beginning the digital humanities, or

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[1] Roy Rosenzweig. *Clio Wired,* p. 95.
[2] Ibid., p. 117.

"humanities computing," was seen as a largely as technical support for the "real" humanities, and that because of the ascendance from a more technical role to a recognized stratum of intellectual endeavors it began being referred to as the Digital Humanities.[3] It is this transition that sets the framework for Berry's article, which sets out to establish the digital humanities from a ground up approach by examining the technical stages of computational markup and code writing. This technical process is what gives birth to the digital humanities in the way of software loaded with content and media for users to consume the information contained within.[4] Berry argues that this process of creating and consuming information has transformed our abilities to understand information outside of traditional knowledge structures such as universities.[5] It is precisely this point that has caused a stir within the academic community as professionals approach the new technology both through its practicality and also what these mediums mean in terms of changing definition of traditional transfers of knowledge.

A third article that falls into the historiography of digital history and humanities is Lisa Spiro's, "This is Why We Fight: Defining the Values of the Digital Humanities." This article looks at the culture of the digital humanities as a community of active professional and amateur scholars coming together to create, critique, and exchange ideas within an online format. The bulk of Spiro's article concerns the creation of guidelines and core values that protect and legitimize the digital humanities community as an active producer of academia. The idea of collaboration is also a central theme within the digital humanities community. For example, Spiro argues that, rather than focusing on lowering the price of knowledge, we should embrace and recognize the importance that humanities have within a society.[6] Spiro's article provides insight into the digital humanities community as a rapidly growing arena where people can collaborate to create legitimate

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[3] David M. Berry. "The Computational Turn", p. 2.
[4] Ibid., p. 4-5.
[5] Ibid., p.5.
[6] Lisa Spiro. "This is Why We Fight", p. 25.

academic works, supported by databases of information, as well as professional insights. It is for this reason that the ethical codes and principles that govern the digital humanities communities are of the utmost importance. These guidelines will ultimately establish a framework that will catapult such communities into gaining mainstream acceptance within established academia.

The above referenced works share a common theme at the foundational level, which is chipping away at the question of what digital history and humanities mean for the future of professional discipline. Although the angles from which these articles approach the topic of digital history and humanities differ, it is important to understand that, at their core, they attempt to establish the methods and means which historians can produce academic works. Whether it is the implementation of multimedia into a textbook, hypertext links within an online article, or a community where knowledge is shared with a mass of people, it is certain that the traditional methods of attaining knowledge are in a state of change. As our class discussion asserted, this does not mean that there are not reasons for caution, because there are many areas for concern. However, the implementation of technology into the discipline of history is changing the ways in which we record and consume information. As Richard Evans asserts in his book *In Defense of History*, "History is an empirical discipline, and it is concerned with the content of knowledge rather than its nature."[7] Therefore as long as the integrity of the information that is available is critically analyzed to verify its accuracy it is a viable resource to be utilized. Evans also states that, "through the sources we use, and the methods we handle them, we can, if we are careful and thorough, approach a reconstruction of the past reality that may be partial or provisional but nevertheless true."[8] Digital history and humanities serve to make the transference and availability of information easier for a researcher to access data as well as construct their work.

One resounding issue that our discussion of digital history and humanities highlighted was the digitization of archival records

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[7] Richard J. Evans. *In Defense of History*, p. 217.

[8] Ibid., p. 217.

and their storage on electronic databases. From a personal perspective, I have had experience in helping to construct a digital archive, which there are many advantages to. However, these advantages did not offset the question of what will happen to the physical documents after they are preserved online. The high cost to store these items leaves one to wonder whether or not many of them will be kept or discarded. Furthermore, if these items are neglected or discarded, what happens if the digital archive goes out of service or becomes damaged or corrupted? These fears aside, online databases, by their own efficiency, cause researchers to miss a traditional experience that many historians cherish, which is spending time in the archives. Although this can be extremely time consuming and costly, there are rare occasions when a historian finds something new that they most likely would have never found if they had not been using traditional research methods to gather information. Nevertheless, digital history is transforming the ways that historians access information and the efficiency and financial benefits that these outlets offer are difficult to ignore.

It is clear that, in the fresh generations of historians that are formally trained in academic institutions, the implementation of digital history methods will be more widely used and available. It would be difficult to find a college level student that has not used an online database such as JSTOR or the Academic Search Premier. The current historiography of digital history and humanities is concentrated with the definition of these fields of studies, as well as their impact on the academic community as they continue to grow and evolve. Although there are legitimate apprehensions about what this could mean about the traditional methods in which knowledge is transferred, it is important to weigh these concerns against any potential benefits. As the discipline of history moves forward, there is no doubt that digital history will become further entrenched in the traditional establishments of training and information gathering, storage, and presentation.