How is Digital Scholarship different from Scholarship? 
And, Should it be?

by
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To blend a term like “digital” with “scholarship” carries with it uncertainties related to academic legitimacy and value. What is revealed in this blending of definitions happens to point to where we are located on the evolutionary scale of the Information Age in academia. At some 30-40 years (depending on who you ask) into the Information Age, we are seeing parallel worlds of scholarship -- print and digital, begin to merge and transform each other. It is from this confluence that we have developed terms like “digital humanities” and “digital scholarship.” But the meanings of these terms remain fuzzy, at best, and prejudicial, at worst.

Digital humanities functions as a parent term for a range of associated forms of humanities scholarship set in a digital context. The outer boundaries of digital humanities are unclear; presently they can only be assured as being the point at which the scholarship is no longer digital in form. To what extent can digital humanities be seen as evidence of the humanities having arrived at a technological state of “contemporary-ness,” sitting comfortably, on a level playing field alongside the technical prowess of the sciences?

Seeing as digital humanities has become somewhat of a catchall term, raises the question what do we then mean by the term “digital scholarship”? Is it the same thing as digital humanities? Or, is digital scholarship something different? The unclear nature of both terms confirms gradual pedagogical shifts of nomenclature that have been taking place, from which, one might expect, a more nuanced vocabulary will one day emerge.

William G. Thomas recently took a stab at an enhanced nomenclature by offering a proposed typology for digital scholarship. Classifying digital scholarship works in terms of data type, components, scope, organization, character and interpretive nature, Thomas provided the three distinct classifications: interactive scholarly work, thematic research collection (aka digital project), and digital narrative. (Fig. 1)

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<th>Interactive Scholarly Works</th>
<th>Digital Projects or Thematic Research Collections</th>
<th>Digital Narratives</th>
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<td>Type of Data</td>
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Fig. 1: Proposed Typology of Digital Scholarship
Organizationally, Thomas based the nomenclature on hypothesis, theme or subject, and criticism. Collectively, he hoped that these terms would help shape and inform a more detailed definition for digital scholarship.

Despite Thomas’ efforts to reach a centralized typology, it would be counterintuitive to define digital scholarship as a canopy term applicable to all disciplines. We wouldn’t, for example, consider it correct usage to say “digital computer science”, “digital engineering,” or “digital medicine.” We essentially accept without hesitation the legitimacy of the incorporation of the digital in the sciences. That we would see the need to qualify scholarship as being “digital” in the humanities reveals the limited extent to which we have integrated technology into the humanities.

It is also further evidence of what can only be assumed to be our youthful spot along the evolutionary timeline of the academic Information Age. In what manner is the form of digital scholarship such a departure from scholarship that it requires we make the distinction that it is digital in form?

Digital scholarship, as defined by Abby Rumsey in 2011, is the “use of digital evidence, methods of inquiry, research, publication and preservation to achieve scholarly and research goals.” Rumsey’s definition accommodates all disciplines; it is described in terms of knowledge creation, dissemination, and preservation. However, Rumsey’s definition doesn’t cover the evaluative stage of digital scholarship; and it is in the evaluative that the disciplines begin to go their separate ways.

In 2012, Adeline Koh identified issues related to the evaluative element of digital scholarship. A key issue she found was the uncertain legitimacy of scholarship in digital form. In such cases, it is not the medium chosen but the ability to understand and navigate that medium that establishes the legitimacy of the scholarship. Navigability can be viewed, as Koh puts it, that which “make(s) a scholar’s work knowable.”

One might argue that the sciences are subject to the same evaluative measures, the same demands for navigational assurances. However, the sciences, by their very nature, have integrated technology as a part and parcel of their development. The systems of navigation that the sciences rely upon are already intuitive to scientists. New technology develops within the sciences and abides by its navigational laws and, where justified, transforms into new forms of navigation that are then adopted. Scientists expect to be presented with new forms of navigation as part of advancement. Scientists are open to accepting new forms of presenting scholarship provided the knowledge contained is found to be legitimate and true.

According to Koh, it is necessary for digital scholarship authors to both explain their work to others and make a justification for the legitimacy of the package that it is delivered in. They do this by assuring the ability of evaluators to navigate the work. The knowledge remains inaccessible as long as the navigation is not understood.

In 2007, a video was uploaded to YouTube that satirizes the frustration of a scholar trying to access scholarship in an unfamiliar system. Brother Ansgar, a medieval monk, has encountered significant difficulty interpreting how to operate a new knowledge containment system, called “book.”
Assistance arrives in the form of a visitor from the medieval tech support helpdesk:

Helpdesk: In this thing there are saved several hundred pages of text. So to proceed you just grab one sheet of paper and turn it over like this.

Brother Ansgar: Aha! But if I want to go back?

Helpdesk: Then you just turn the page back by holding the paper here…and then you’re back to where you were.

Brother Ansgar: That’s great. But when I finish, what do I do then?

Helpdesk: Then you just fold the cover like this. Now it’s closed and everything’s safe inside it.

Brother Ansgar: So you’re sure I won’t loose any of the text?

Helpdesk: No no. Everything is safe, unless you set fire to the whole thing. Which isn’t likely.

Brother Ansgar: When you’re used to paper rolls it takes some time to convert to turn the pages of a – beek.

This skit is a parody of what was so relatable during its 2001 original airdate, in terms of adaptation to a world of computers, the Internet, and a rapidly growing online environment. Brother Ansgar’s predicament, encountering elemental navigational barriers, reflects the tension scholars face today in interpreting how to access and navigate digital scholarship. These barriers, by extension, threaten a scholar’s ability to adequately evaluate and assess the value and legitimacy of a digital work. Digital scholarship, when understood as a component of Rumsey’s creation and dissemination, is in a state of purity. However, in considering Koh’s evaluative state, the merit of the knowledge is judged in reference to the ability to make sense of, and consider intuitive, the navigational structure of the container for that knowledge. If the navigational structure is found to be less than intuitive the value of the knowledge is diminished.

Digital scholarship is oftentimes not in a digital landscape because of any altruistic desire to save paper or to take advantage of a certain cache, but because components of the scholarship exist as digital media. Scholarship that includes digital assets is intertwined and dependent upon the digital medium in order to express and have scrutinized the knowledge contained. And it is that knowledge, not its container, which ought to be judged.

As access to assets continues to improve, it will be (more likely than not) because those assets are available online. We can expect an increase in works of digital scholarship. Navigational assistance within the digital medium will continue to be essential; it will continue to be a necessary component of “making a scholar’s work knowable.” We must necessarily employ the term “digital scholarship” as long as there is a need for that navigational assistance.
Are we a moment before emerging from a Plato’s Cave? Discovering that the distinction we feel digital scholarship requires today in the humanities is later categorized as redundant? Remembering our Brother Ansgar, understanding the elements of basic navigation of a new knowledge container creates the ability to access the scholarly content. Today the inclusion of the term “digital” in scholarship has allowed us to begin to assimilate, categorize, and organize the integration of this type of scholarship into the humanities.

Will there be a point at which navigation of a digital scholarship work is intuitive, just as if you’d lifted the cover of a book and revealed a printed page? Are we standing at a threshold where digital scholarship and just plain old scholarship are mutually exclusive terms? We will have crossed the threshold when knowledge is judged by the merit of the content, not its container. We will have crossed that threshold when digital scholarship is considered an antiquated term; having fallen out of favor, replaced by the radically simplified term – scholarship.

References


