

Library Sphere

"The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hemisps and whose circumference is inaccessible." — Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel"

“Why Digital Humanities?” Notes from a panel discussion at NYU.

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I just got back from a panel discussion at NYU entitled “[Why Digital Humanities](#),” co-sponsored by NYU’s [Center for Teaching Excellence](#) and NYU’s [Humanities Initiative](#). It featured [Kathleen Fitzpatrick](#) (professor of Media Studies, Pomona College, visiting scholar at NYU, and co-editor of [Media Commons, a Digital Scholarly Network](#)), [Deena Engel](#) (professor of Computer Science, NYU), [Michael Stoller](#) (Director, Collections and Research Services, NYU Libraries), and [Diana Taylor](#) (University Professor, NYU, and founding Director of the [Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics](#)).

Here are some brief notes I took during the discussion:

Kathleen Fitzpatrick kicked off with a wonderful overview of the current discussions/debates about digital humanities as a discipline. She asked “What are the borders of digital humanities as a discipline?” and talked about two methods of inquiry in the DH: using computers to help ask and answer traditional humanities research questions (e.g., text analysis); and looking at the field of computing as the object of research itself, asking of computing the kinds of humanities research questions more traditionally applied to texts.

Deena Engel then talked about pedagogical models and told about how she’s been working for years to bring the humanities and computer science together for both undergraduates and graduates. In her Computer Science course [Computing in the Humanities and the Arts](#), the CS students are well prepared for the computing aspect of the course and she helps them understand the humanities side of the equation by bringing in guest speakers and having them work with archival materials. In addition to bring humanities into computer science, she’s also thinking about how to bring computer science to humanists; this coming year the Computer Science and English departments will jointly offer a digital humanities course.

Michael Stoller talked about publishing and distinguished between e-book publishing, which is basically like publishing a print book but doing it online, and publishing content grounded in digital methodologies. The latter are the more open-ended, dynamic, flexible types of “publications” that many of us now associate with Digital Humanities. He asked how will publishers move beyond traditional publishing models and said that we need to find appropriate publishing methods for DH scholarship so that it can be “taken seriously” by scholars (i.e., with peer review, editing, and the other kinds of scholarly trappings that signify serious scholarship and get people tenure).

Diana Taylor wrapped up by showing us some of the amazing things the [Hemispheric Institute](#) has accomplished under her direction, including their [Encuentros](#), and the [Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library](#), which was accomplished in conjunction with [NYU Libraries](#). She talked about how humanities scholars can use digital technology to create and use new objects of analysis, rather than simply looking at the same research objects as before but in the digital realm.

The forum was lively and interesting, but was over all too soon. However, the conversation continues with the [NYU Digital Humanities discussion group](#), coordinated by Chad Curtis, NYU’s Librarian for Literary Studies and Digital Scholarship in the Humanities.

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