

Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » Digital Humanities Summit Wrap-Up

I've been going to digital humanities conferences of one kind or another for many years now, but last week's summit of digital humanities centers at the National Endowment of the Humanities^[1] showed that finally there is extraordinary interest in the field. People in positions of power and influence showed up for the first time. Vint Cerf (one of the founders of the internet and now evangelist for Google) was there. Many funders came as well, which is important since the work I and my colleagues do at the Center for History and New Media^[2] is not inexpensive. In general, an excitement permeated the room—the feeling that with the exponential growth in digitization and the rise of digital tools, we are on the cusp of a new age of scholarship. Here are my rough notes from the meeting.

James Harris, the Dean of Arts and Humanities at the University of Maryland began the summit by highlighting how critical collaboration is. This theme continued for the rest of the meeting; it was probably the single word that came up the most in discussion.

Bruce Cole, the NEH Chairman, candidly told the audience how he started the job as a tech newbie but has presided over great strides in the digital realm, such as the NEH's recent digitization of 30 million pages of historical newspapers. He now believes that we are entering a new era in which rapid advances in digital technology will have a profound impact on the humanities.

Cole said there were three goals of the digital humanities initiative at NEH: 1) use digital technology to make the humanities more accessible to everyone; 2) use the technology to foster increased collaboration in the humanities (he raised the human genome project as an exemplar from the sciences); 3) explore how digital technology will change the way we read, think, write, and create tools, and how we might turn huge digital

corpora into wisdom. He highlighted the new programs at the NEH: digital start-up grants (over 70% of applicants are new to NEH, so it's reaching a lot more people, he noted); digital humanities fellowships (encouraging scholars to think about how digitization and digital technology will change their field); digital humanities teaching grants; digital humanities challenge grants (to endow large-scale projects and centers). He said that NEH's working with [IMLS](#)^[3] on these fronts has gone very well, and he believes that digital humanities centers will be critical for building the scholarly cyberinfrastructure.

John Unsworth continued that theme in his plenary address, "Digital Humanities Centers as Cyberinfrastructure." He began by asserting that digital humanities centers **are** cyberinfrastructure. These centers offer a chance to really engage the consumption of primary materials in digital form, and they can create relationships with institutions like libraries and other collection-holders over time that can then be built upon in ways that individuals can't do. These relationships are important. Centers thus build trust so scholars don't have to do. They can also build relationships with corporate entities, and they can match researchers' interests with institutions. They can also mentor people in digital technology and grant writing, offer grad students experience, and connect with other programs (like library and information sciences).

Unsworth further noted that the cultivation of leadership critical. Human infrastructure is as critical to the success of digital humanities as the cyberinfrastructure. It takes a long time and many talented people to create things like the [NCSA](#)^[4]. Unfortunately, the ad hoc nature of the current digital humanities infrastructure is difficult—we need long-term funding, interoperability, the technological and the social.

Unsworth concluded by emphasizing that we have had many failures, but that failures are important and provide lessons. Very few standards and robust tools have come out of academic software development. But maybe academic software should be more for proof-of-concept. The honest reporting of failure is important, so we all can learn. "Stop hiding

the bodies!”

Vint Cerf then took the stage to discuss “Google and Digital Humanities Centers.” To laughs from the scholarly audience, he admitted that when you finish a Google search you are not done with your resesarch—it’s vital to remind people that everything of value is not online. He said that [Google Book Search](#)^[5] is their attempt to add to the online corpus and at least make things findable. And to no one’s surprise, he said that indexing of books should be fair use, as long as the display of snippets is limited. He believes “copyright is a mess and needs to be rethought” (e.g., [Creative Commons](#)^[6]). Cerf encountered considerable resistance from one member of the audience (and later I heard from a few others who partially or fully agreed with that antagonist), who noted that Google is a big company in the business of making money from its scans. Cerf tried to defuse the tension over this issue by offering to meet the dissenter in the alley for a duel (more laughs).

Cerf ended with a “1000 year view”—he argued we need to plan for that time horizon. But it’s unclear what to do right now. It might be that having an 8-bit ASCII version of everything (thus losing layouts and images) is the only way to deal with the 1000-year question, i.e. to ensure longevity. We need in the near future to learn how to make the digital world sufficiently stable—as stable as the world of print. On a positive note, he said that collaboration is something that’s unexpectedly arisen out of the internet, e.g., [Wikipedia](#)^[7]. The threshold for publishing is much lower: the minimum publication used to be the article, but now you can contribute two sentences to the web if you want.

Two wikis with greater information about the digital humanities came out of the conference. The first is [the wiki for the conference itself](#)^[8], which contains many more details than I’m able to relate here. The second is [a wiki I set up](#)^[9] with the blessing of the group to try to have a single location for those interested in the digital humanities to find information about centers, people, tools, standards, and other elements in the multifaceted world of the digital humanities. Please contribute to it

if you can.

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References

1. ^ [National Endowment of the Humanities](#) (www.neh.gov)
2. ^ [Center for History and New Media](#) (chnm.gmu.edu)
3. ^ [IMLS](#) (www.imls.gov)
4. ^ [NCSA](#) (ncsa.uiuc.edu)
5. ^ [Google Book Search](#) (books.google.com)
6. ^ [Creative Commons](#) (creativecommons.org)
7. ^ [Wikipedia](#) (www.wikipedia.org)
8. ^ [the wiki for the conference itself](#) (apps.lis.uiuc.edu)
9. ^ [a wiki I set up](#) (digitalhumanities.pbwiki.com)
10. ^ [View all posts in Collaboration](#) (www.dancohen.org)
11. ^ [View all posts in Conferences and Workshops](#) (www.dancohen.org)
12. ^ [RSS 2.0](#) (www.dancohen.org)
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