Social Media, Research, and the Digital Humanities

NAOMI WELLS (SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON)

Social media is an increasing if still relatively marginal focus of research in the Digital Humanities (DH), as reflected in recent conferences in the field. Nevertheless, particularly given the ways media and communication studies have taken the lead in establishing the theoretical and methodological foundations for social media research, critical questions remain about what digital humanists can bring to the study of social media. With those humanities researchers who do engage with social media often influenced by qualitative approaches such as digital ethnography, social media research further adds new complexities to discussions about what we understand by the digital in relation to the humanities, and more specifically the extent to which the field is or should be defined by the use of digital, or more specifically computational, methods.

   This chapter addresses these often implicit, and at times explicit, questions that risk positioning social media researchers in the humanities on the periphery of the field. While not always productive to overly define, or at worse police, disciplinary boundaries, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the uncertain position of social media research in DH and to attempt to uncover some of the dynamics that underlie this reality. This chapter is addressed both at the broader humanities community and those already located within DH structures, in recognition of the fact that despite DH now becoming a more established field, there remains a continued need to further expand it in ways that broaden the perspectives on and approaches to digital research in the humanities. The ever increasing uses of social media—as well as its archival instability that may mean significant content is no longer available to study in the near future—highlight the urgent task of rapidly growing the field of humanities researchers from both within and beyond DH who are willing and able to apply their expertise to these contemporary cultural materials.

TAKING SOCIAL MEDIA SERIOUSLY AS CULTURAL TEXTS

In terms of the wider humanities community and its traditional objects of study, one of the primary obstacles to engagement with social media materials continues to be a hesitancy concerning the legitimacy of social media content as cultural texts deserving of serious consideration and analysis. This may appear to be an overly pessimistic view of the field, and it is interesting to note how in relation to video games, Coltrain and Ramsay present a more optimistic viewpoint: "in the end, it was not hard for an academy well adjusted to the long shadow of cultural studies to conform itself

to these new objects of inquiry" (2019, 36). While I would question their more positive framing of the academy, I agree that it is cultural studies we should (re)turn to when articulating the necessity for humanities researchers to engage with these new forms of digital text that play a central role in any attempt to define or understand contemporary culture.

Indeed, when attempting to explain why we should take social media seriously as cultural texts, it can feel like rehearsing the same arguments that arose when cultural studies established itself as a discipline in the 1960s and 1970s.[1] The fact that similar discussions are taking place highlights how the recent rapid expansion in the uses of digital media and technologies, and the processes of social and cultural change this has triggered, may reflect a similar turning point as that identified by Hall in post-war Britain, when new forms of mass culture associated also with technological change provoked what he described as a "crisis in the humanities" (1990).

More specifically, contemporary digital culture once again calls on us to reflect on our understandings and definitions of culture. The participatory nature of social media and the lower barriers to "public artistic expression and civic engagement" (Giaccardi 2012, 3) have provoked an increased blurring of more professional or intentional forms of cultural production and more anthropological "everyday" forms of cultural practice and texts. Significantly, at least in my own disciplinary area of Modern Languages, many of those who have engaged with social media, including myself, often originate from a primarily linguistics background. The probable explanation is that more "everyday" cultural and linguistic practices are a more established object of study for linguists. Nevertheless, while linguists certainly bring an important perspective, researchers with a background of studying more formal cultural production associated with literature and the arts have much to contribute to the study of social media.

Social media platforms have become an important space in which professional, semi-professional, and more grassroots forms of cultural production are published, circulated, and remediated. The rich intertextuality of social media content (Varis and Blommaert 2018), as well as the ways social media users evaluate and make use of the distinct aesthetic and narrative affordances of different platforms, further point to the potential contributions of humanities researchers in offering valuable insight into the cultural practices and texts associated with social media. This is not, however, to attempt to collapse different cultural forms and practices, or to make glib equivalences between a novel crafted over several months or years, and short tweets rapidly composed and sent out over the course of a day. Rather, the aim is to better acknowledge and understand the undeniably important cultural "work" that occurs in the everyday, even if it is undeniably distinct in both form and content, as well as to recognize that literary and other arts must be understood in relation to everyday practices (Puri 2016, 40). Equally, recognizing the cultural value of social media content should not be mistaken for an idealistic lens that erases the social and material conditions in which social media texts are created or, as with the earlier equally contentious study of popular culture (Hall [1981] 2020), that ignores the extent to which social media content may conform to or perpetuate imperialist and capitalist cultural forms and ideologies.

At this point, it is important to reflect on what the relationship of social media research in DH might be with the more established body of research in (new) media and communication studies. In reality, the boundaries may well be necessarily blurred, with cultural studies often underpinning work in that field and media studies operating similarly at the intersection of the humanities and social sciences. Any attempt to articulate or distinguish between a humanities, media studies or social sciences approach will inevitably be partial and cannot entirely avoid simplistic reductions of complex heterogeneous fields. Nevertheless, while allowing for, and indeed advocating for,

porous disciplinary boundaries rather than fixed or rigid definitions, it is I believe still productive to identify broad trends and the different emphases that researchers' distinct disciplinary training and analytical frameworks bring to similar objects of study.

As Moreshead and Salter highlight in this volume (Chapter 9), media studies pays particular attention to infrastructural changes, which in social media research is reflected in an emphasis on platforms and their features or "affordances," with a particularly important body of critical platform studies research that addresses the capitalist logics that underpin them (see for example Fuchs 2015). While there is also a body of media studies research focusing more on the content produced through these platforms, a stronger humanities emphasis on social media "texts" has the potential to significantly expand our understanding of the different ways groups and individuals appropriate these platforms for distinct representational purposes. By text here, I refer not specifically to the textual, but rather to a more expansive understanding of cultural text that encompasses audio, visual, and multimodal texts. In his own reflections on the relationship between DH and media studies, Sayers argues that engaging with media studies encourages the humanities to go "beyond text" (2018, 4), although he appears to be referring more specifically to the textual, rather than the broader notion of cultural text. Nevertheless, in the rush to emphasize the novelty and distinctiveness of social media—as the term "new media studies" makes most explicit—what may have at times been obscured is the extent of continuity with earlier cultural texts, including the "purely" textual,[2] and more importantly the continued relevance of existing theoretical and analytical frameworks in the humanities.

This is not to deny the value of (critical) platform studies, and in particular the strong emphasis in media studies on understanding the specific affordances of different social media platforms (Bucher and Helmond 2018), which undeniably play an important role in facilitating or constraining the production of different forms and types of social media text. As with the study of electronic literature in DH, the multimodal affordances of social media platforms challenge humanities researchers who previously worked on predominantly textual material to develop new interpretive frameworks that encompass the "rich combinations of semiotic modes" in social media texts (Jones, Chik, and Hafner 2015, 7). Equally, as Moreshead and Salter emphasize, it is vital for DH researchers to acknowledge and confront the role of the algorithmic in constructing digital spaces and constraining who can participate in them. A humanities emphasis on texts should consequently not mean extracting social media content from its contexts of production and reception, or ignoring the specificities of these new cultural materials. Instead, a humanities lens that draws on both this existing body of platform-focused research and its own history of theoretical and analytical approaches to the study of cultural texts has the potential to significantly expand our understanding of the different uses groups and individuals make of these platforms.

More specifically, humanities scholars may bring new perspectives to social media content that challenge the emphasis on social media as primarily communicative tools. Again, social media undeniably performs extremely important communicative roles, but the dominance of a communication studies framing risks obscuring the importance of social media platforms as spaces of cultural representation. Discussions of social media affordances, for example, often refer primarily to "communicative" or "social" affordances, rather than the often implicit but less explored representational affordances of different platforms. Communication and representation are inevitably blurred concepts on social media and in everyday life, but humanities researchers who bring a stronger emphasis on representational practices in literature, art, or other cultural forms are likely to bring a different lens to these materials that foregrounds, for example, aesthetic

and narrative choices. Again, such research should be understood as complementary rather than as competing with earlier communication studies research. The intent here is not to critique media and communication studies approaches in themselves, but rather to highlight that humanities researchers have an under-explored potential to bring different emphases and analytical lenses to their counterparts in other fields. More importantly, rather than an attempt to substitute media and communication studies perspectives, cross-disciplinary forums and collaborations between researchers working across these fields can together provide a more holistic understanding of the multiplicity of cultural, social, political, and economic functions of social media platforms and texts.

It is important at this juncture to acknowledge work that exemplifies this more humanities-based approach to researching social media. In my own disciplinary area of Modern Languages, for example, researchers such as Ogden (2021) and Sadler (2018) exemplify the ways language- and culture-focused social media research can simultaneously address both traditional humanities themes of narrativity and visual representation, while equally considering questions of power and the specific conditions of production and reception of social media content.

Furthermore, there is a growing emphasis on understanding social media content as a form of born-digital cultural heritage, which can help to foreground connections with key areas of humanities research such as cultural memory studies. In particular, the focus on social media as a form of heritage provokes questions concerning the longer-term preservation of social media content that memory institutions have begun to grapple with, in collaboration with the community of Internet history and web archive researchers that sit at least partially within DH structures.[3] Nevertheless, further expanding the contributions of humanities researchers to exploring the cultural significance of social media materials, particularly in relation to questions of heritage and memory, is vital for supporting the work of those attempting to archive social media materials. In particular, a stronger body of humanities research on social media could play a vital role both in terms of strengthening the case for the preservation of these materials, and in terms of supporting and advising archivists on the extremely challenging but unavoidable task of selecting materials of particular significance for preservation from the vast range of social media content potentially available.[4] In turn, the work of (web) archivists can help to further social media research, with archival preservation another route to ensuring wider acceptance of the cultural significance of social media materials, particularly for the humanities community given its close associations with forms of archival research. Nevertheless, given the challenges associated with archiving social media at scale (Thomson 2016),[5] it is vital that such archiving initiatives are developed alongside a more expansive body of humanities research on these materials in their "live" form.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLEXIVITY IN DH

To turn to the position of social media research within DH structures, one of the key questions it raises is in relation to how humanities researchers who study social media may engage in a more limited way with the types of computational methods that at least for some researchers are considered integral to the field's disciplinary identity. This is not to say that it is not possible for humanists to apply computational methods to social media content in productive and valuable ways. However, what I want to suggest is that the use of computational methods should not be considered a prerequisite for DH research. Here then I would suggest that while Sayers's explanation

that "if media studies is *about* media and technologies, then digital humanities works *with* them" (2018, 1) undeniably reflects earlier trends in both fields, DH should be sufficiently expansive to more explicitly incorporate both those who apply digital methods to texts that previously existed in non-digital forms and those who apply more traditional humanities approaches to born-digital materials.[6]

This is not to argue that methodologies are not an important aspect of disciplinary identity, and one of the valuable contributions that DH has brought to the humanities community is to prompt greater reflection on humanities methodologies more broadly. In particular, the need to justify the applications of computational methods to humanities research, while inevitably at times frustrating, has led to a rich body of work that reflects more explicitly on the value and implications of different methodological approaches in the humanities. What I consequently want to propose is that, rather than DH being defined by the application of a specific and clearly defined set of methodologies, we should instead emphasize a heightened methodological reflexivity as a defining strength of the discipline in ways that still allow for an openness of approaches to digital research.

To apply this explicitly to social media materials, while I have earlier emphasized continuities with earlier cultural forms, this is not to deny the specificity of these materials and the need to think critically about the effects of transferring and applying specific methods and approaches to them. In particular, and returning to the question of the doubted cultural value of born-digital social media content, this distinguishes social media texts from more traditional literary or historical objects of study. When applying computational methods to literary or historical texts, the cultural value or significance of these texts is often taken for granted. This is partly due to the prestige associated with certain cultural forms in the case of literature or with the accrual of value over time for more "everyday" historical documents that is often reinforced by archival preservation. Computational work on these materials also often built on a pre-existing body of more traditional qualitative humanities research that further helped to demonstrate the cultural value of these materials.

What I want to emphasize here is that, before rushing to transfer the same DH computational methods over to social media texts, it is important to reflect on the potential effects this may have for materials whose cultural value continues to be questioned and where computational research is not building on an existing body of qualitative humanities research. There are of course also practical obstacles to easily applying computational approaches to social media content due to the limits placed by many platforms on the forms of scraping necessary for large-scale computational research. Nevertheless, given the scale of social media data and the emphasis on metrics underpinning many of these platforms (Grosser 2014), large-scale computational approaches may in fact appear to be the more obvious or even conventional approach to studying these materials. Again, this distinguishes social media content from earlier literary or historical objects of study, where the groundbreaking work of digital humanists was to apply new computational methods in ways that challenged, or at least proposed an alternative to, the more conventional ways of studying such texts. In contrast, the application of computational methods to social media research in the humanities carries with it the risk of conforming to, and potentially even reinforcing, the corporate logics that underpin these platforms. There are of course still critical ways of applying computational methods to social media content, but it may be the application of seemingly "traditional" smaller-scale humanities approaches such as close reading that goes against the grain of the seemingly overwhelming mass of data and metrics thrown out by these platforms. To put it another way, just as referring to literary or historical texts as "data" may have challenged many in the humanities community to reflect more explicitly on their objects of study, might referring to social media "content" and "users"

as "texts" and "authors" have a similar effect in challenging wider understandings of the uses and value of these materials?

Again, here we need to acknowledge an existing body of qualitative social media research associated in particular with forms of digital ethnography that aim to understand the significance of digital media and technologies in the daily lives of individuals and groups, with many studies focusing specifically on social media.[7] Such methods have been deployed primarily by anthropologists and media studies and linguistics scholars who again may at least partially identify with the humanities but who are rarely embedded within DH structures. Digital ethnographic approaches have nevertheless revealed how the close analysis of social media contexts and content can provide rich insight into contemporary cultural, linguistic, and social practices. Again, humanities researchers need not merely replicate such research but while ethnography may not be as embedded as a strictly humanities approach, there are close affinities between ethnographic approaches and their emphasis on "thick description," and more established humanities approaches such as close reading. As digital ethnography research has further revealed, the ways it relies on developing close relationships with social media users can provide ethical routes to researching more private forms of social media content, particularly on increasingly important platforms like WhatsApp (Tagg et al. 2017), than larger-scale and for practical reasons often necessarily more distanced computational approaches to social media research. For example, the more public nature of Twitter and the related ways it makes its data more freely available at scale is a primary reason why it dominates social media research, even if significant demographics are underrepresented on the platform. Again, smaller-scale humanities approaches that similarly rely on developing close relationships of trust with research participants, such as oral history methods for example, may have a similar potential to broaden our understanding of a much wider range of social media platforms than those that more readily support computational approaches to research.

A more expansive view of DH as more than "just" a method further has the potential to bring in a wider range of scholars from across the humanities, many of whom may lack the expertise or the opportunities to develop the high-level technical skills necessary for much computational research. This is not to deny the value of developing such skills, but there remain undeniable obstacles, particularly for researchers located in academic structures without either the training or technological infrastructure and support to make such research possible. While there are other important initiatives in DH to address such inequalities,[8] an additional route to expanding the field is to better support and incorporate into DH structures smaller-scale qualitative approaches to the study of digital materials such as social media content that might be more easily applied in such contexts. This is particularly important in terms of dramatically expanding research from beyond the Global North on social media, given the ways social media platforms are appropriated into different cultural contexts for distinct communicative and representational purposes.[9]

A broader definition that moves DH further beyond the practical application of computational methods is also an opportunity to foreground the ways the DH research community as a whole contributes to wider understandings and in particular theorizations of the digital. This echoes longer-term calls for the DH community to more actively contribute to discussions and debates on the role of digital media and technologies in relation to "the full register of society, economics, politics, or culture" (Liu 2012, 491). Equally, while there may appear to be an obvious division between those applying computational approaches to pre-digital texts, and those studying born-digital materials through predominantly qualitative approaches, there are many areas of

productive overlap between the two that justify their inclusion within the same broad field of DH. "Born-digital" research materials are in practice hard to easily define or isolate, particularly since social media users are themselves often active participants in the remediation of pre-digital cultural materials. Equally, even where social media researchers may not themselves engage with computational methods associated with machine learning and natural language processing tools, participation in discussions on the potential uses and misuses of such tools is of undeniable value for "non-computational" digital researchers. In particular, social media researchers should ideally incorporate into their qualitative analysis an at least partial understanding of the computational tools, and associated algorithmic culture, underpinning these platforms.[10] Even for social media researchers who apply primarily qualitative approaches to analyzing their research materials, computational tools can play a valuable role in facilitating the collection and identification of relevant research materials, both when deployed by the researcher themselves or where qualitative Internet research may rely on the earlier computational labor of others, such as web archivists. These are just a few examples of existing areas of overlap, but they point to the necessity of an expansive definition of DH research that facilitates and strengthens such connections, and that ensures the field recognizes and values the multiplicity of ways humanities researchers engage with the digital in terms of both how and what they study.

CONCLUSION

This essay has aimed to articulate a potential route towards embedding social media research in DH in ways that can also contribute to further expanding the field to incorporate a wider range of perspectives and approaches from across the humanities. It is an inevitably partial account and undoubtedly reflects my own positionality as a UK-based humanities researcher with training and a background in primarily qualitative approaches to contemporary cultural and linguistic practices in both their digital and non-digital forms. The intention was not, however, to suggest there is anything "better" about a humanities approach than a media studies approach, or a qualitative rather than quantitative approach. Instead, this should be seen as an invitation to reflect on how we as humanities scholars respond to the undeniable importance of social media in relation to contemporary cultural forms and practices, building productively and collaboratively on a more established body of existing research in other disciplines. Equally, the emphasis on qualitative approaches is aimed not at diminishing the rich body of computational research in the humanities produced by existing DH researchers, but rather at advocating for a more expansive definition of digital research in the humanities that furthers our field's potential to make a vital and wide-ranging contribution to understanding the many roles that digital media and technologies play in our lives.

NOTES

1. Although cultural studies has been taken up in different ways in different national contexts, and is itself influenced by theorists from other contexts, the discussion here refers primarily to the UK context in which the field first arose.
2. Although arguably humanities research has never been purely textual, with for example a rich tradition of studies focusing on the materiality of historical and literary documents, and the archives in which they are stored.

3. See for example the work of the Web Archive studies network WARCnet: https://cc.au.dk/en/warcnet/.
4. The archiving of social media materials, particularly at scale, also presents major ethical challenges (Jules, Summers, and Mitchell 2018). Again, there is an opportunity here for the field of DH to contribute more actively to the ethics of social media and Internet research in ways that both complement the existing work of groups such as the Association of Internet Researchers and better support those working within DH structures undertaking research in this area.
5. I would like to thank Beatrice Cannelli (School of Advanced Study) who through her doctoral research on archiving social media has furthered my own awareness and understanding of these challenges.
6. It is important to note here that there are groups and initiatives that do adopt this more expansive view of DH, with for example the US-based Association for Computers and the Humanities explicitly incorporating into their 2021 conference Call for Papers "Humanistic research on digital objects and cultures" as an area of interest alongside more computational approaches (December 29, 2020).
7. Other labels such as Internet, virtual or online ethnography have also been used (see for example Hine 2000), with some differences in approaches, although they tend to have in common persistent forms of observation and immersion in specific online contexts, and a focus on the richly contextualized analysis of online texts and (inter)actions.
8. See for example Risam (2018), and the work of the GO::DH Minimal Computing working group to address computing infrastructural constraints, https://go-dh.github.io/mincomp/.
9. See for example Dovchin (2015). I would also like to thank Nayana Dhavan, a doctoral researcher at King's College London, for highlighting this point at a recent seminar on social media research and DH.
10. To offer an example from my own research focusing on multilingualism online, while my primary interest is in how individuals use and move across languages in their social media content, the increasing uses of machine translation are an unavoidable feature of social media platforms that inevitably will have some effect on individual choices to use or mix languages, or to engage in content originally posted in languages other than those they know or use.

REFERENCES

Bucher, Taina and Anne Helmond. 2018. "The Affordances of Social Media Platforms." In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, edited by Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick, and Thomas Poell, 233–53. London: SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473984066.n14.

Coltrain, James and Stephen Ramsay. 2019. "Can Video Games Be Humanities Scholarship?" In *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, edited by Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, 36–45. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvg251hk.

Dovchin, Sender. 2015. "Language, Multiple Authenticities and Social Media: The Online Language Practices of University Students in Mongolia." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 19 (4): 437–59. https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12134.

Fuchs, Christian. 2015. *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Giaccardi, Elisa. 2012. "Introduction: Reframing Heritage in a Participatory Culture." In *Heritage and Social Media: Understanding Heritage in a Participatory Culture*, edited by Elisa Giaccardi, 1–10. New York, NY: Routledge.

Grosser, Benjamin. 2014. "What Do Metrics Want? How Quantification Prescribes Social Interaction on Facebook." *Computational Culture*, no. 4. http://computationalculture.net/what-do-metrics-want/.

Hall, Stuart. 1990. "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities." *October*, 53: 11. https://doi.org/10.2307/778912.

Hall, Stuart. 2020. "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular' [1981]." In *Essential Essays*, vol. 1, edited by David Morley, 347–61. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hine, Christine. 2000. *Virtual Ethnography*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Jones, Rodney H., Alice Chik, and Christoph A. Hafner. 2015. "Introduction: Discourse Analysis and Digital Practices." In *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age*,

edited by Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chik, and Christoph A. Hafner, 1–17. London and New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Jules, Bergis, Ed Summers, and Vernon Mitchell. 2018. "Ethical Considerations for Archiving Social Media Content Generated by Contemporary Social Movements: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations." Documenting The Now White Paper. https://www.docnow.io/docs/docnow-whitepaper-2018.pdf.

Liu, Alan. 2012. "Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?" In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew K. Gold, 490–510. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816677948.003.0049.

Ogden, Rebecca. 2021. "Instagram Photography of Havana: Nostalgia, Digital Imperialism and the Tourist Gaze." *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 98 (1): 87–107. https://doi.org/10.3828/bhs.2021.6.

Puri, Shalini. 2016. "Finding the Field: Notes on Caribbean Cultural Criticism, Area Studies, and the Forms of Engagement." In *Theorizing Fieldwork in the Humanities*, edited by Debra A. Castillo and Shalini Puri, 29–50. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Risam, Roopika. 2018. *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Sadler, Neil. 2018. "Narrative and Interpretation on Twitter: Reading Tweets by Telling Stories." *New Media & Society* 20 (9): 3266–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817745018.

Sayers, Jentery. 2018. "Introduction: Studying Media through New Media." In *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*, edited by Jentery Sayers, 1–6. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Tagg, Caroline, Agnieszka Lyons, Rachel Hu, and Frances Rock. 2017. "The Ethics of Digital Ethnography in a Team Project." *Applied Linguistics Review* 8 (2–3). https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2016-1040.

The Association for Computers and the Humanities. 2020. "Call for Proposals: Association for Computers and the Humanities 2021." *The Association for Computers and the Humanities* (blog), December 29. https://ach.org/blog/2020/12/29/call-for-proposals-association-for-computers-and-the-humanities-2021/.

Thomson, Sara Day. 2016. "Preserving Social Media." Digital Preservation Coalition. https://doi.org/10.7207/twr16-01.

Varis, Piia and Jan Blommaert. 2018. "Conviviality and Collectives on Social Media: Virality, Memes, and New Social Structures." *Multilingual Margins: A Journal of Multilingualism from the Periphery* 2 (1): 31. https://doi.org/10.14426/mm.v2i1.55.