

Explaining Digital Humanities

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INTRODUCTION

Sir, what is digital humanities? This was a question a junior colleague who just started her Master's program at one of the universities in Nigeria asked in 2023. My response though, was, what else can the digital humanities be other than an emerging sub-field in the humanities? This question posed by the junior colleague in regarding the definition of digital humanities highlights a significant disparity in its recognition and adoption in the country. While the field is relatively established in places like the UK and the US, it remains under-researched within Nigerian universities. This is despite the pervasive influence of digital technology across various sectors in Nigeria, including business, education, libraries, and governance, and its integration into everyday activities like shopping, banking, and healthcare. The initial response to the question, framing digital humanities as an emerging sub-field within the humanities, underscores the need for greater awareness and exploration of its potential within the Nigerian academic landscape.

The humanities are undergoing a significant transformation through the integration of digital technology. This digital shift impacts various aspects of the humanities, including research methodologies, funding opportunities, and the perceived value of artistic expression. Furthermore, it influences the development of infrastructure, incentive structures, and fosters a greater sense of interdisciplinary collaboration. Ultimately, this digital integration leads to the creation of highly networked humanities characterized by new knowledge production processes and outputs (Patrik Svensson 2009)

This article serves as an introduction to the field of Digital Humanities. It focuses on clarifying the meanings of key terms such as digital, digitalization, and humanities themselves. Rather than providing an exhaustive overview of digital advancements in the humanities or examining specific projects, this paper aims to establish a foundational understanding of the concept of Digital Humanities. It achieves this by presenting various perspectives from distinguished scholars in the field and directing readers to accessible and updated resources for further exploration.

Humanities, The Digital, and Digitalization

The exploration of digital humanities requires a foundational understanding of its core components: the humanities, the concept of digital, and the process of digitalization. The exploration will begin by defining the humanities as a field of study. It then moves to clarify what "digital" means in this context, followed by an explanation of digitalization. Finally, it examines how the humanities have adopted and integrated digitalization to advance their research, teaching,

and public engagement. This groundwork is essential for a thorough evaluation of the digital humanities sub-field.

The term Humanities, derived from the Latin "Humanus- Humanitas," encompasses human nature, civilization, and culture. It signifies the quality of being human, distinct from humanism, which involves specific philosophical beliefs, and humanitarianism, which focuses on charitable endeavours. According to Wikipedia, the term originates from the Renaissance Latin phrase "studia humanitatis," meaning the study of humanity. This expression historically referred to the study of classical literature and language, considered essential for a well-rounded education during the Renaissance period. The term *studia humanitatis*, or humanities, encompasses all fields of study that are not classified as sciences. This broad category includes the arts, such as literature, music, history, and photography, as well as recreational and performing arts. It also encompasses the study of religion, including natural, Christian, and comparative theologies, church history, and denominations. Furthermore, the humanities include philosophy, covering metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics, and various philosophical schools from ancient to modern times. Finally, languages, such as English and French, are also considered part of the humanities, distinguishing them from the social and natural sciences (Humanities ND).

Anne Burdick et al (2012) highlight the shared ground between the humanities and the sciences, emphasizing their common commitment to intellectual rigor and free inquiry. While acknowledging that the humanities may employ empirical methods, they are not defined by strict empiricism. Instead, the humanities prioritize exploring questions of worth, cultural significance, and deeper meaning, recognizing the urgent need to address these aspects of human experience (Anne 2012 p4). Schreibman et al., (2004) summarize that the humanities encompass a broad range of disciplines, including archaeology, art history, classics, history, lexicography, linguistics, literary studies, music, multimedia, performing arts, philosophy, and religion. These fields collectively strive to define culture and deepen our understanding of the human experience. By exploring various facets of human expression and thought, the humanities provide valuable insights into what it means to be human.

The term "digital," as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, primarily relates to digital signals and computer technology. It encompasses technologies like digital recording, digital cameras, and digital television. A digital signal itself is characterized by expressing data as a series of distinct values. Computer technology, a subfield of computer science, includes key areas such as programming, networking, hardware, and software. Furthermore, "digital" also refers to the method of recording or storing information using a series of 1s and 0s, representing the presence or absence of a signal. Kinza Yasar (Nd) clarifies the definition of "digital" by explaining that it refers to electronic technology that handles data using positive and non-positive states. The positive state is represented by the number 1, while the non-positive state is represented by 0. Consequently, data in digital technology is expressed as strings of 0s and 1s. Each individual 0 or 1 is called a bit, and a group of bits that a computer can address as a single unit is known as a byte. Comprehensively, therefore the term "digital" encompasses a wide array of technologies and content formats that rely on digital processing and representation. This includes diverse areas such as virtual reality, audiobooks, digital music, mobile apps, digital arts, digital communication, digital media, podcasts, and digital marketing. Essentially, anything that utilizes digital technology for its creation, distribution, or consumption can be considered digital.

The core concept of digitalization revolves around the transformative adoption of digital tools. This adoption can manifest in two primary ways: the creation of entirely new products and services, or the modification and enhancement of existing ones. Digitalization impacts not only the products themselves but also the operations and services surrounding them. It's important to distinguish digitalization from digitization, which specifically refers to the conversion of analog information into a digital format. Therefore, while digitization is a component, digitalization encompasses a broader strategic shift towards leveraging digital technologies (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digitalization>).

Digitalisation, as defined by Hannah Sausen (2020) citing Parviainen et al (2017), involves integrating digital technologies into various aspects of life. It encompasses the conversion of analog data, such as printed images, videos, and text, into digital formats. More broadly, digitalisation signifies the adoption of digital technologies across processes, organizations, businesses, and other societal domains, fundamentally changing how these areas function. Over the last two decades (Lorella Viola 2023), digital tools, technologies, and infrastructures have become increasingly crucial in shaping how we understand, preserve, manage, maintain, and share digital objects. This shift is particularly evident in traditionally object-centred fields like cultural heritage, where digitization has become standard practice. Heritage institutions, including archives, libraries, museums, and galleries, are consistently digitizing vast amounts of heritage materials.

Explaining Digital Humanities

The field of Digital Humanities (DH) evolved from Humanities Computing, expanding to encompass disciplines like media studies, social computing, and humanistic computing. Its origins can be traced back to the 1940s and 1950s, with pioneering work by figures such as Fr. Robert Busa (1913-2011) and Josephine Miles (Angelo Stagnaro 2017, Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan (2018). This historical foundation highlights the long-standing intersection of computational methods and humanistic inquiry that defines DH today.

The field of Digital Humanities (DH) is characterized by ongoing efforts to define its scope and boundaries. As noted by Claire Warwick (2012), these definitions are often transient, susceptible to obsolescence, or overly restrictive due to the field's continuous growth and evolution. This inherent dynamism makes pinning down a single, definitive explanation challenging. The definitions that follow are drawn from a series of YouTube video documentaries compiled by Róbert Péter in 2021, offering a snapshot of perspectives on DH at that point in time. Further, the digital humanities represent an interdisciplinary field where the methodologies and tools of science and technology are applied to humanities research. It's a collaborative and creative space that enables scholars to explore research questions in ways that wouldn't be possible without the aid of computers. Essentially, it's about leveraging digital tools and techniques to advance our understanding of human culture, history, and society.

Digital Humanities, as defined by Elli Bleeker, a scholar in manuscript studies, text modelling, and XML technologies for text modelling, involves applying digital technologies and methodologies to humanities studies, uniting disparate information for collaborative scholarly analysis. Roderick Coover, Professor of Film and Media Arts, School of Theatre, Film And Media Arts, expands on this, stating that digital humanities utilizes digital technologies to explore novel questions through innovative methodologies and practices. Essentially, it's about leveraging digital

tools to enhance and transform humanities research. Digital humanities, as defined by Emeritus Professor Kathryn Sutherland, Faculty of English, University of Oxford, involves applying quantitative methods to address existing challenges within humanities disciplines. It's characterized as a convergence of different fields rather than a standalone discipline. The core idea is to leverage computational tools and techniques to analyse and interpret humanities-related data, offering new perspectives and insights. Matthew Vincent, co-director of the National Inventor with the American Centre of Research in Amman, Jordan, defines digital humanities as the application of computational techniques to cultural heritage. He characterizes this field as a "miracle" due to its unique ability to bridge the gap between traditionally disparate areas, such as practice and theory, as well as the humanities and other scientific disciplines. This interdisciplinary approach allows for new perspectives and methodologies in understanding and preserving cultural heritage.

The definition of Digital Humanities (DH) has been a subject of ongoing debate, with no definitive scholarly consensus reached over the past decades (Róbert Péter 2021). This lack of a clear definition, as highlighted by Matthew Milner, stems from the expansive possibilities that the digital age offers to humanities scholarship. A core question in this debate revolves around whether DH represents a distinct field separate from traditional, analog humanities, or if it simply involves the adaptation and application of digital technologies and media to existing humanities disciplines (Matthew Milner (2012)).

Some scholars, including Allington et al. (2016), and Brennan (2017) i, have expressed concerns about the integration of digital methods into the humanities. Their argument centers on the belief that this incorporation may compromise the core principles of the humanities, specifically agency and criticality. They suggest that the digital realm could potentially "pollute" or undermine these essential aspects of humanistic inquiry. Lorella Viola (2023) critiques the early opposition to Digital Humanities, noting that the "digital" was often portrayed as an immaterial, agentless, and ultimately untrustworthy force. This perspective framed the digital as a threat to the authenticity and authority of original sources. Lorella Viola (40) argues that these criticisms failed to engage with the complexities of digital tools and methods, instead reducing the digital to a simplistic, non-human entity lacking critical agency. This oversimplified view hindered a more nuanced understanding and application of Digital Humanities.

The discourse surrounding Digital Humanities (DH) raises fundamental questions about its nature and scope. Key among these is defining the criteria that qualify a project as belonging to DH. Whether DH possesses sufficient unity to be considered a distinct disciplinary field, complete with its own standards and subfields. Also, a central point of inquiry in the discourse is whether DH is primarily about applying computational methods to humanities research or if it represents a more profound shift towards computational and algorithmic thinking within the humanities. Furthermore, the debate considers whether DH signifies a genuine paradigm shift in how humanities research is conducted and understood (Róbert Péter 2021). Ultimately, these discussion seeks to clarify the boundaries, common practices, and unifying elements within the diverse applications of Digital. These debates surrounding the definition of digital humanities have spurred significant insights from scholars in the humanities. These insights have largely clarified the concept, effectively addressing and, to a great extent, resolving the initial arguments and ambiguities that surrounded its definition. The field has matured to a point where a shared understanding is emerging, overshadowing previous disagreements.

David M. Berry (2019) argues that understanding the digital humanities requires a shift in perspective. Instead of viewing digital technology as an external force encroaching upon academic disciplines, scholars should recognize that computer networks, especially the internet, have fundamentally altered the accessibility and usability of digital resources worldwide. This perspective highlights the transformative impact of digital networks on scholarly practices. Access to information has significantly transformed research capabilities within the arts and humanities. The field of digital humanities is a testament to this, as it integrates knowledge and methodologies from diverse disciplines such as language, literature, history, music, media and communications, computer science, and information studies. By merging these varied perspectives, digital humanities provides a novel framework for exploring and understanding complex research questions. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis than traditional methods might offer (David. M Berry 2019).

In his introduction to *What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?* Matthew G. Kirschenbaum (2010) quoted Cynthia Selfe that, people who say that the last battles of the computer revolution in English Departments have been fought and won don't know what they're talking about. He asserted that if our current use of computers in English studies is marked by any common theme at all, it is experimentation at the most basic level. As a profession, we are just learning how to live with computers, just beginning to integrate these machines effectively into writing- and reading-intensive courses, and just starting to consider the implications of the multi-layered literacy associated with computers.

The integration of digital technology is not only crucial for English Departments but also holds significant relevance for other humanities disciplines such as music, theatre arts, film studies, religious studies, philosophy, and language studies (including African languages like Igbo and Yoruba, as well as languages like French). These departments are increasingly recognizing the potential of digital tools to enhance and diversify their educational approaches, ultimately contributing to the advancement of the education sector as a whole. The adoption of these technologies allows for innovative teaching methods, broader access to resources, and new avenues for research and creative expression within these fields. Concretely speaking, the digital humanities cover a wide range of subjects, such as compiling online primary source collections, integrating methods from traditional humanities disciplines such as rhetoric, history, philosophy, linguistics, literature, art, archaeology, music, and cultural studies and social sciences, and it encompasses both digitized and born-digital materials, utilizing computing-provided capabilities including digital mapping, digital publishing, data visualization, hypertext, hypermedia, information retrieval, data mining, and statistics. According to Wikipedia online, the field of digital humanities is interconnected with several other academic disciplines. These related areas include software studies, which examines the cultural and social impact of software; platform studies, focusing on the specific characteristics and effects of digital platforms; and critical code studies, which analyses the underlying code of software to understand its implications. Furthermore, fields like new media studies, information science, media theory of composition, game studies (particularly concerning the design and creation of digital projects), and cultural analytics share common ground and contribute to the broader understanding of digital humanities. These disciplines often intersect and inform the methodologies and perspectives used within digital humanities research and project development.

The field of digital humanities is increasingly utilizing computational methods to analyze large datasets of cultural information (Roth 2024). A defining characteristic of digital humanities projects is their collaborative nature. These projects often involve diverse teams or labs comprising faculty, staff, graduate and undergraduate students, IT specialists, and external partners from institutions like galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. This collaborative approach distinguishes digital humanities from more traditional humanities research, which is typically characterized by sole authorship.

Computational techniques are increasingly utilized in the digital humanities to explore existing research areas and challenge established theoretical frameworks. This application of computational methods leads to the formulation of new research questions and the development of innovative approaches to understanding humanities subjects (Grant 2012). The integration of computation allows for a fresh perspective, pushing the boundaries of traditional humanities research. Digital Humanities therefore presents significant opportunities to re-evaluate the role of humanities within society. Scholars in this field are redefining the scope of humanities research, providing innovative perspectives on both historical and contemporary cultures. This transformation allows for new understandings and interpretations of our world, past and present (David. M Berry 2019).

Digital instruments have facilitated the integration of the humanities into broader societal culture. The emergence of digital humanities as a sub-field allows individuals, particularly humanities scholars, to connect with places they haven't physically visited. This connection enhances their understanding of the past and its significance for the present and future, as highlighted by David M. Berry (2019). The digital humanities, therefore, serve as a bridge, linking historical context with contemporary relevance through accessible digital tools and resources. The Digital Humanities (DH) have significantly broadened the scope and influence of humanities disciplines. This expansion is evident not only within academic settings but also, and perhaps more crucially, beyond the confines of academia. The integration of digital tools and methodologies allows for new forms of research, analysis, and dissemination of knowledge, ultimately enhancing the impact and relevance of the humanities in the wider world (Anne Burdick et al 2012; 4).

Digital humanities projects are revolutionizing how we engage with history and culture. By leveraging digital technology, we can now connect with the great minds of the past in new and immersive ways. Furthermore, digital platforms are fostering connections between cultures and communities through access to digital art museums, concerts, theatre performances, and virtual reality experiences. This digital exposure enhances understanding and appreciation across diverse backgrounds.

Digital humanities significantly broadens our understanding of global cultures (Humanities ND), fostering greater respect for them. The integration of digital technologies, media, and evolving social models is reshaping public life and creating novel avenues for intellectual exchange. This digital shift also influences how humanistic research and artistic creations are disseminated and engaged with in the public sphere (Matthew Milner 2012), marking a significant transformation in the landscape of humanities.

Catherine et al. (2023) highlight a growing trend where scholars, previously unfamiliar with digital research methods, are increasingly utilizing social media and digital tools. This shift is largely driven by the accessibility of data and the availability of tools that facilitate large-scale

data collection and analysis. The ability to, for example, scrape millions of tweets from platforms like Twitter and employ tools for efficient data coding has sparked significant interest among researchers studying online phenomena such as activism, harassment, violence, and racism. The digital transformation compels scholars in the humanities to revisit core questions about knowledge creation and pedagogical approaches for future generations (Lorella Viola, 2023 p29, 30). This transformation is not a passing trend but a permanent shift in society, academia, and the overall process of knowledge creation. It necessitates a fundamental rethinking of how we approach these areas within the humanities.

Summary and Conclusion

This article addresses the question, "What is Digital Humanities?" and explores its definition, scope, and impact, particularly in the context of its emerging recognition. It begins by defining the core components: the humanities, the concept of digital, and the process of digitalization. The humanities, rooted in the study of human culture and civilization, are being transformed by digital technology, influencing research, funding, and interdisciplinary collaboration. "Digital" refers to electronic technology using binary data, while "digitalization" involves integrating digital technologies into various aspects of life, from creating new products to modifying existing ones. The paper also traces the evolution of Digital Humanities (DH) from Humanities Computing, highlighting its interdisciplinary nature and the ongoing debate surrounding its definition.

DH involves applying digital tools and methodologies to humanities research, enabling scholars to explore questions in innovative ways. While some scholars have expressed concerns about the potential impact on the core principles of the humanities, others emphasize the transformative impact of digital networks on scholarly practices and the accessibility of digital resources. The article emphasizes the collaborative nature of DH projects and the use of computational methods to analyse large datasets of cultural information. It also highlights the opportunities DH presents for re-evaluating the role of humanities in society and connecting with the past in new and immersive ways. Ultimately, DH broadens our understanding of global cultures, fosters intellectual exchange, and compels scholars to revisit core questions about knowledge creation and pedagogical approaches. The increased accessibility of literary and historical artefacts through online platforms and digital databases is a key impact, making content more widely available than previously possible. As noted, digital humanities utilizes computer-based technology to create digital tools and databases for texts, artworks, and other artefacts. A key impact of digital humanities is the increased accessibility of literary and historical artefacts through online platforms and digital databases, making content more widely available than previously possible with print formats.

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