Digital Humanities, Digital Hegemony

Exploring funding practices and unequal access in the digital humanities

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The digital humanities represent, for many researchers, the potential for extending their research in terms of audience, scope, methods, and opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration. Ideally, this potential should also extend access to cultural engagement and preservation for marginalized groups. In practice, the reality may be quite different for projects that focus on diverse racial, gender, ethnic, and cultural heritage. In this short article we discuss preliminary findings from a study of patterns in U.S. federal funding for digital humanities projects, with particular focus on cultural heritage and archival projects. Through the lens of funding and access, we raise some questions about whether the digital humanities can represent a shift from old hegemonies or run the risk of expressing them in a new technological paradigm.

What is old is made new

In recent years, many cultural heritage projects have come to focus on preserving and extending access to materials through digital means. Some are even beginning to include analytical tools that allow users to better contextualize and understand historical documents and other materials. We are at a critical juncture for supporting diversity in the digital humanities and risk embedding historical, self-reinforcing patterns of marginalization which are obfuscated by a focus on new technological and methodological modes of engagement. This represents a form of technological determinism and is something that many humanists express a desire to avoid as we move into a new era of humanities research which considers digital technology to be an embedded feature of the human social world.

Earhart found that hope for racial diversity in the context of the digital humanities canon has not been realized in terms of the production of digital content and the treatment of race in digital humanities scholarship[1]. Inclusion is often a first step toward achieving

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1   Can Information Be Unfettered? Race and the New Digital Humanities Canon. Amy E. Earhart, in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, University of Minnesota Press, 309–18, 2012.

equality, but to merely create digital archives of materials from marginalized people is not enough. McPherson argues that we must understand racial and cultural engagement as embedded in the development of modern technological paradigms. Digital media and modern computation grew up concurrent with the civil rights movement, and McPherson suggests that we can avoid "replay[ing] formalist and structuralist tendencies of new media" by systematically considering race and computation together in the context of the digital era[2].

Efforts to incorporate transformative critique into digital humanities practice and pedagogy are occurring, but they are still largely speculative and hopeful in nature[3]. They represent the demand that we not repeat the mistakes of the past, but the path through which that is possible is not always as clear. If we are to move beyond creating digital troves of documents about and from systematically marginalized people, then it will take more than a will to do so. However, it is arguable that we have not even arrived at a place of inclusion, when it comes to support. What would that look like in practice?

The importance of funding

External funding is key to the operation of many organizations, including institutions that handle the preservation of cultural heritage materials. The practices surrounding the distribution of funding for projects and institutions represent implicit statements about the value, utility, and importance thereof. When funding is necessary for the continued existence of a project or institution, this consideration is even more important, particularly when the focus is on historically underprivileged and marginalized groups.

The U.S. federal government, through the National Endowment for the Humanities, (NEH) funds digital humanities projects through a number of grant programs, with some tailored to specific areas, some more general. Grantees comprise universities, museums, archives, and libraries for a variety of projects including those that preserve and provide access to cultural and educational resources. The NEH specifically encourages grants that "conduct research for the study, documentation, and presentation of imperiled cultural history" and list specific examples of projects that might meet those aims[4].

Funding mechanisms for cultural projects generally, and digital humanities in specific, provide for a public good. They are an avenue for the advancement of the dissemination, exploration, and study of cultural materials. Conversely, they represent a mechanism through which power can be apportioned and agendas can be supported. Groups that benefit from hegemonic control over the monetary and political apparatuses that support cultural projects ostensibly own the cultural landscape resulting from that support. This is what Antonio Gramsci referred to as *cultural hegemony*. While cultural hegemony is

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2   Why Are the Digital Humanities so White? Or Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation. Tara McPherson, in Debates in the Digital Humanities, University of Minnesota Press, 139–60, 2012.
3   Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?. Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips, Journal of E-Media Studies, 3 (1), 2013.
4   Protecting Our Cultural Heritage - http://www.neh.gov/grants/protecting-our-cultural-heritage - Accessed 17/01/2016.

more difficult to directly control than monetary or political hegemony, it is so closely linked to the others that it can be controlled indirectly. In the United States, white men have long held hegemony over the cultural discourse, through control of resources superior to those of other racial and gender groups[5].

Cultural hegemony is not always expressed directly or openly. It can become systematized and formalized to the point that it is almost unnoticeable at the surface level. In the case of the United States, it is hardly contestable at all. Groups at the margins of the hegemony need not directly give consent, but instead can simply be so completely and systematically disenfranchised that it is nigh unto impossible for them to resist it at all[6]. This feature makes it difficult to identify instances of cultural hegemony at all, let alone make recommendations as to how it can be subverted.

Annist argues that project-based funding allows for cultural hegemony to be controlled by the small groups that have control over the allotment thereof[7]. Each project is seemingly disconnected from every other and no direct connection can be drawn between their features, except that they all focus on some broadly-construed, necessarily vague theme. The bulk of digital humanities initiatives are funded in this manner, through agencies that establish grant programs to support certain initiatives, as discussed above.

The aims of the NEH in funding imperiled digital cultural heritage is a noble attempt given the considerable apathy in the U.S. over the plight of minorities, marginalized, and disenfranchised groups. How those aims are and will be met is perhaps still somewhat uncertain, as we will discuss below.

The realities of funding

NEH is funded through U.S. taxpayer dollars appropriated by Congress. As a matter of transparency, the agency releases data about the projects and grants it funds online. All of the historical data about funded grants can be downloaded from the NEH website[8]. Data are only publicly available for projects that have been funded.

NEH provided a total of $225,462,386.29 for digital cultural heritage projects through 656 individual grants over the course of the period between 1 January 2007 and 30 September 2016. The grants came from 8 different programs, but were concentrated in the Humanities Collections and Reference Resources (282) and Digital Humanities Startup Grants (263). Some of the programs, including the two above, are specifically oriented toward digital humanities work, while others are more general. We subset the

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5   Cultural Hegemony in the United States. Lee Artz and Brenda Ortega Murphy. SAGE Publications, 35-37, 2000.

6   The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities. T. J. Jackson Lears, The American Historical Review, 90 (3), 567–93, 1985.

7   Outsourcing Culture: Establishing Heritage Hegemony by Funding Cultural Life in South Eastern Estonia. Aet Annist, Lietuvos etnologija: socialinės antropologijos ir etnologijos studijos, 9(18), 117–138, 2009.

8   Data.gov datasets (NEH) - https://securegrants.neh.gov/Open/data/ - Accessed 02/06.2015.

available data to include only those grants which focused on digital projects or had some component that involved digital methods.

All of the funded grants were assigned codes for two variables using U.S. Census categories for race/ethnicity and gender to determine the focus of the grants[9]. Within the available data, only a subset could be identified as having a gendered or race/ethnicity focus, based on the subject of the project. Our categories were applied to those projects
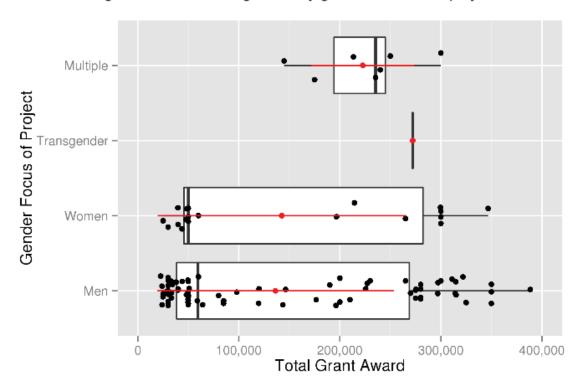
Figure 1. Grant funding levels by gendered focus of project

that dealt with people, either individually or in groups. For example, if the project was about the work Franz Boas, the German-American anthropologist, it was coded as *white* and *male.* Or if a project examined Native American women's art, it would be coded as *Native-American* and *female.*

Race/ethnicity and gender as characteristics of funded projects

Of the total 656 projects, 110 could be identified as having a gendered focus and 288 as having a race/ethnic identifying characteristics. The boxplots in figure 1 shows the distribution of funding levels for the different gender categories. The number of grants with a gendered focus differed considerably for men (82) and women (20). There were a

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9   In the case of gender we adapted the codes to include *transgender* and a *multiple* category to accommodate projects treating mixed groups. Similarly for race, we added *multiple* and *other* categories to handle descriptions that did not fit into the basic U.S. Census categories.

handful of projects that focused on a mixed group of men and women (7). There was only one project that mentioned transgendered individuals at all. As shown in figure 1, the grants for projects on women were clustered at the high and low ends of the rage, with tighter dispersion at the low end. Projects about men also clustered at the low end but had greater dispersion over the entire range of funding amounts. Mean and standard deviation are represented in the red overlay. Mean levels of funding awarded was greater for projects about women ($209,600) than for men ($136,300). The total amount of funding awarded over the 9-year period was greater for men ($11,173,501) than women ($4,192,237).

The violin plots in figure 2 shows the distribution of grant funding levels by race/ethnicity identifying characteristics of projects (mean and standard deviation of funding amount is shown in red overlay). Similar to gender, the funding amounts clustered at the high and low ends of the range of funding amounts. Table 1 displays number of funded projects and amount of total funding sorted by race/ethnicity.

As shown there is great disparity between projects identified as having a focus on white people and other races/ethnicities. In addition, a cross-tabulation of the two coded variables finds 77 projects focused on white men compared with 2 focused on black men. There were none for other groups of men. For white women and white mixed-gender groups there were 5 and 4 projects, respectively. There were also 4 projects focused on Asian women. This reinforces the notion that there is some disparity present.
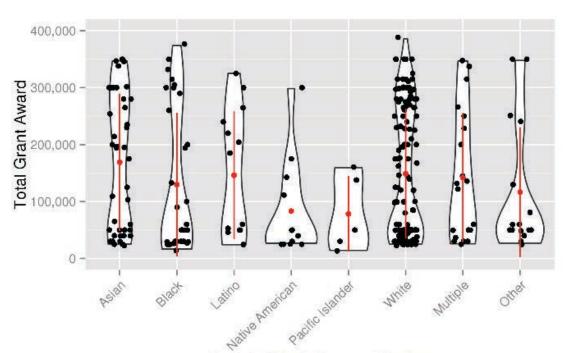
Figure 2. Grant funding levels by race/ethnic identifying characteristics of project

Table 1. Funded projects and amounts by race/ethnicity

Race/ethnicity	Count	Percentage	Total funding ($)
Asian	43	14.9	7,264,251
Black	34	11.8	6,478,892
Latino	15	5.2	3,456,137
Native American	12	4.2	998,216
Pacific Islander	6	2.1	1,084,645
White	142	49.3	21,145,213
Multiple	20	6.9	2,839,911
Other	16	5.6	1,864,723

A focus on white men as individuals

Of the projects analyzed in this study, 26 focused on digitizing the work and intellectual legacies of individual people. Of these, only one woman was singled out for individual treatment: the "Ida M. Tarbell Papers Digitization Project," awarded $30,000. Similarly, only one African-American was at the center of a project: "Digitizing W.E.B. Du Bois,"

awarded $314,787. This means that projects on individual women and black Americans were awarded only 8% of the total $4,225,061 awarded to projects on individuals. All of the rest focused on white men of historical importance. Several, such as Walt Whitman and Thomas Jefferson, had multiple projects representing them.

Non-white people are treated as groups

While white men were likely to be treated as individuals in a given project, other race/ethnic categories and women were treated as groups almost exclusively. Instead of a project focusing on specific historical figures, the narrative and documentary history of these groups is considered at the aggregate level. This disparity is important to note because it speaks to a larger social phenomenon whereby great (white) men stand out for their achievements, but other groups have been largely left to be remembered for their collective struggle.

The future, and striving to do better

The research presented here is preliminary and exploratory, but given what we know from critical race theory and the theory of cultural hegemony as described above, the data point to systematic inequalities in digital humanities funding based on race and gender of the kind that are showing up in many other cultural venues at present. Of course these trends, where they exist, are not merely features of the present, but the product of long historical processes in which groups vie for control. In the current era, however, we have begun to awaken to the necessity of inclusion, breaking down barriers that hamper marginalized groups, and giving power to the powerless.

In order to understand why and how we are currently not serving these aims, it is necessary to continue research into systematic inequalities as expressed by the social, institutional, and governmental structures which generate scholarship and technological development. Patterns in funding provide us one path to better understanding where inequalities lie, but there are certainly many other avenues of inquiry available to us. It is up to us to find them.