The Post-Digital Potential of Man and Machine

At the beginning of his article Michael Roy, Dean of Library and Information Services and Chief Information Officer at Middlebury College, states: “Many campuses are witnessing the birth of a new field of inquiry called the digital humanities, which applies computational methods to humanistic inquiry, provides new methods for presenting scholarship online, and encourages novel forms of collaboration.” Accordingly, he and other writers in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review explore the extent to which the humanities disciplines, along with other fields of scholarship, are influenced by the human or by the digital. Is this a question of man-versus-machine or man-and-machine? The suggested conclusion is that it is not either/or but both/and. The human and the digital are increasingly inseparable.

As David M. Berry, Co-Director of the Centre for Material Digital Culture at the University of Sussex, reminds us in his article, the distinction between the digital and the non-digital is increasingly blurred in our post-digital world: “This is a world of anticipatory technology and contextual computing that uses smart diffused computational processing to create a fine web of computational resources that are embedded into the material world.” Charles J. Henry, President of the Council on Library and Information Resources, agrees: “Information technology is inextricably woven into the fabric of our cultural heritage.” Although “the proliferation of digital surrogates for analog resources” and “the flourishing of born-digital resources” constitute the single most important difference in today’s academic world, “digitization of itself is but one instance within an array of new tools, delivery mechanisms, and interpretive applications that contribute to a vibrant intellectual milieu.”

For example, Berry describes a post-digital way of working that applies “computational principles, processes, and machinery to humanities texts.” This is not a case of analog-versus-digital. The digital humanities tries “to take account of the plasticity of digital forms and the way in which they point towards a new way of working with representation and mediation.” Likewise, Henry notes that the digital surrogates for medieval manuscripts of the poem Roman de la Rose allow a post-digital inquiry that “affords the scholar and the student new opportunities to test hypotheses, ask questions, and approach the poem with a more encompassing frame of reference.”

Digital scholarship is valuable not just because of the process but also because of the products. Roy elaborates: “The products of digital scholarship are often digital works that can be integrated into the classroom experience, offering important access to primary-source materials and, in many cases, providing new tools and analytical forms that can be assigned alongside traditional secondary literature. The discrete, granular nature of this scholarship has affordances for remix and reuse that are not typical of the traditional scholarly output in the humanities.”

Remix and reuse are a way to understand technologies as “potentiality,” a concept explained by Jim Groom, Executive Director of the Division of Teaching and Learning Technologies at the University of Mary Washington, and Brian Lamb, Re-Director of Innovation at Thompson Rivers University. Potentiality is “the idea that within the use of every technical tool there is more than just the consciousness of that tool, there is also the possibility to spark something beyond those predefined uses. The only real way to galvanize that potentiality is to provide the conditions of possibility—that is, a toolkit for user innovation.” Such a toolkit enables individuals to find novel uses for technologies and to reclaim the innovation that surrounded the web in its early days. The “user-driven revolution” can “reclaim innovation as a positive force as higher education continues to engage with digital and networked technologies.”

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Alison Byerly, President of Lafayette College, notes that engagement with digital technologies uncovers “a different kind of meaning.” She explains: “Technology uncovers patterns or information that would otherwise remain invisible…. Technology can help us to generate information we might not otherwise see.” Speaking to both technologists and humanists, she says that although we must come to terms with a different way of thinking as a result of technology, “in the end, the act of interpretation is a fully human endeavor.”

Challenges remain, of course. Clifford A. Lynch, Executive Director of the Coalition for Networked Information, asks: “How can we curate and manage data now that so much of it is being produced and collected in digital form? How can we ensure that it will be discovered, shared, and reused to advance scholarship? We are struggling through the establishment of institutions, funding models, policies and practices, and even new legal requirements and community norms.” Lynch reminds us: “Changes in the practice of scholarship need to go hand-in-hand with changes in the communication and documentation of scholarship.”

In spite of the changes and challenges, an infectious enthusiasm surrounds the digital humanities and digital scholarship more broadly. The work illustrates the best of man and machine collaborating to explore, innovate, and celebrate our cultural heritage and future.

Diana G. Oblinger (doblinger@educause.edu) is President and CEO of EDUCAUSE.

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