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Diversity in Digital Humanities

Digital humanities is a relatively new discipline and its practitioners are constantly pushing its boundaries and modifying its perspectives.¹ The general perception suggests that digital humanities, as a discipline, is balanced in terms of gender. Moreover, we have been told that “Digital Humanities is ‘Nice’” and we have been told why it is so nice (Scheinfeldt). However, these perceptions are easily contradicted. Even the simplest of analysis (such as the ratio of first author gender for accepted papers in the annual Digital Humanities conference) produces evidence undercutting the claims to equality and to the inclusiveness of the field.

The pervasive belief in gender balance in digital humanities prompts the question of how the field might appear if it could be analysed from across a broader set of perspectives. This article analyzes data gathered through a survey of self-described “digital humanists” to understand the current situation of the field. I conclude by making some suggestions which might improve the position of minorities within digital humanities.

On May 23rd 2015, Lorna Hughes, then professor of Digital Humanities at University College London, tweeted a link to Gordon Hunt’s article “There is certainly no gender imbalance in digital humanities!”² The tweet sparked a range of opinions concerning Hunt’s article. Ben Brumfield, for example, pointed out that the situation in digital humanities was comparatively better than is the case in other fields, such as computer sciences (See Misa 2010 and the data by the US National Center for Education Statistics, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_349.asp). I wanted to see hard data showing whether Hunt’s article was correct. My own experience of academia, in general, and digital humanities, in particular, suggests that indeed there is significant imbalance in the digital humanities. However, without data, my perception could (and probably should) be dismissed as just a personal impression.

¹ See, for example, Gold 2012.

² <https://www.siliconrepublic.com/discovery/2015/05/20/theres-certainly-no-gender-imbalance-in-digital-humanities>



Figure 1

Indeed, within a few minutes of the start of the twitter discussion, Scott Weingart presented the result of his analysis of the gender ratio of authors accepted for the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations conferences between 2010 and 2013, where women represent around 30% of authors. Against this, Hughes argued that she was one of six female digital humanities professors in London alone.³ However, all these women were also white and native English speakers.

³ It appears she was referring to Melissa Terras (UCL), Claire Warwick (now holding an honorary post at UCL), Sheila Anderson (King's College), Marilyn Deegan (King's College), and Jane Winters (University of London). There are other powerful women in DH. The Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations website shows that Bethany Nowviskie, Arianna Ciula, Karina van Dalen-Oskam, Susan Brown, Julia Flanders and Lisa Spiro figure prominently. All of these women have had long and influential trajectories in the field. However, this should not deceive us into thinking that this is a particularly egalitarian field or that there is no need for advocacy. Moreover, the six female professors in London are all English native speakers, while Karina van Dalen-Oskam (current chair of the steering committee), Arianna Ciula and myself (both serving as representatives of the European Association for Digital Humanities) are the only female members of the executive of ADHO who are not native English speakers. I am the only one of these women not to come from a country in the global north. Moreover, at the time of writing, I am the only woman in the ADHO executive who is of mixed race. Tomoji Tabata, the representative to the Japanese Association for Digital Humanities, is the other non-caucasian representative.

Weingart's statistics are clear-cut.⁴ Despite the prominence of some female scholars, women are underrepresented at the most important gatherings in the field. In an email correspondence with me, Weingart has said that he was interested in using digital humanities methods to research the field itself, a sort of meta-digital humanities research:

...essentially I've just wanted to turn DH methods on ourselves for a number of reasons. What's it like to be scrutinized the same way we scrutinize? What's our own history and contours? And (especially relevant in the context of this graph and these discussions) how can we become better scholarly citizens, and better global citizens?

We tend to inherit problems of representation and equality from academia & tech culture at large, but just because we're no worse than the rest of 'em doesn't mean we shouldn't try to be better. Recognizing problem areas is (I hope) a good start. ⁵

The work on the digital humanities acceptances was carried out in collaboration with Nickoal Eichmann. They intend to continue this analysis in the future. Our private exchange prompted a self-reflective post entitled, *What's Counted Counts*,⁶ in which Weingart acknowledges that other aspects of diversity are much more elusive than gender:

The answer was immediately obvious: **ease**. I'd attempted to explore racial and ethnic diversity as well, but it was simply more fraught, complicated, and less amenable to my methods than gender, so I started with gender and figured I'd work my way into the weeds from there.

I'll cut to the chase. My well-intentioned attempts at battling inequality suffer their own sort of bias: by focusing on *measurements* of inequality, I bias that which is easily measured. It's not that gender isn't complex (see [Miriam Posner's wonderful recent keynote](#) on these and related issues), but at least it's a little easier to measure than race & ethnicity, when all you have available to you is what you can look up on the internet.

Weingart's post suggested to me that I should try to bring to light those aspects which are not readily available for measurement. The obvious way to do this was through a survey. This made me hesitate: a survey requires people's willingness to participate. It would have to be designed and to be tested. It would have to ask very personal questions, some of which might be potentially identifying. There were many instances in which it could fail and many reasons that might push it towards that failure.

⁴ Scott Weingart has been analysing the acceptances to the DH since 2010. He does this work every year, after the results are released.

⁵ Scott Weingart, personal communication, June 15, 2015.

⁶ <http://www.scottbot.net/HIAL/?p=41425>

Despite my misgivings I have now carried out the survey and I am in the process of analysing the results. With these materials, I should be in a good position to describe the state of DH and to make suggestions for policies of diversity and inclusion. I would like to present these results as part of Benelux 2016.