Digital humanities: New toys for the boys?

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The early days of computing (1950s-1970s) were characterized by a high level of gender equality. In what was then a new area of research and employment, there was no established gendered division of labour. This kind of engineering did not require physical strength but many tasks did require dexterity and attention to detail. The stereotype of the badly dressed, antisocial and male nerd/geek/hacker emerged somewhat later. The domination of computer science by men took time to take hold (Abbate, 2012; Ensmenger, 2010), and the view of digital technologies as a source of women's liberation or further oppression varied widely over the past 50 years (Wyatt, 2008).

The humanities as a whole (though there are important differences between fields) has always been much more open to women's participation (even if a glass ceiling continues to operate), and to gender as an object of analysis. So what happens when computer scientists and humanities scholars work together in the field of digital humanities? Concerns have been raised that digital humanities is simply a way of capitalizing the humanities, and enrolling it in an increasingly neo-liberal university environment. Some have complained that DH is not always sensitive to the epistemic traditions of the humanities. Others have gone so far as to suggest that digital humanities is a retreat from the critical tradition of the humanities (e.g. Zaagsma, special issue of BMGN, 2013; Grusin, 2014, drawing on debates held at MLA conferences). In this paper, I will pick up a related theme, and suggest that DH is a way of 'masculinising' the humanities, and I will do this in two ways. First, I will examine the available data regarding the participation of women (focusing on Dutch universities and DH centres). Second, I will address the more difficult question regarding whether or not the involvement of women makes any difference to the topics addressed, the methods used and the kinds of knowledge that are produced (Haraway, 1985; Harding, 1986). This will be done by analyzing key DH texts, using both close and distant reading techniques.

This paper is intended to be provocative, in order to stimulate discussion and debate about the future direction of DH in terms of both women's participation and the role of gender as object and as critical lens.

References

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