Waiting for the Next Wave: Humanities Computing in 2006

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PAPER

Humanities Computing reaches back a long way. There have been a number of occasions, notably in the early years of the PC revolution of the middle eighties, when one could get the impression, that it would soon become a part of each and every university's infrastructure. Still, fifty years after the heroic age of the field, this impression has not been proven valid. And talking to representatives of Humanities Computing one frequently gets the impression, that the prevalent feeling is that of an approach that is undervalued by academia at large.

This presentation will present a tentative analysis why this situation exists and if and how it could change.

We propose, first to look at Humanities Computing as a succession of waves of Humanistic scholars coming to grips with major new technologies. These four waves we define as follows:

- 1949 - ca. 1970
  - Primary approach: Ad hoc programming in the context of large, funded projects.
  - Medium: Higher Programming Languages.
- ca. 1970 - ca. 1985
  - Primary approach: Using method oriented program packages.
  - Medium: SPSS; OCP.
- ca. 1985 - ca. 1997 - "PC Revolution"
  - Primary approach: Using standard software.
  - Medium: dBase; MS Access
- ca. 1997 - today - Web / XML orientation
  - Primary approach: Computer as presentational medium.
  - Medium Web Tools

Some examples will be given, showing that these “waves” have usually resulted in the rapid and explosive expansion of the computer users among the Humanities, focusing so much on “lead technology” of the wave, that the large audiences of newcomers tended to consider the knowledge of the representatives of the preceding cases as irrelevant. Which implies that each of these waves has usually been carried by a specific academic age cohort at roughly the same stage in their career, developing its own networks of associations, conference series and publication outlets. Ignoring, unfortunately, the same structures created by the preceding cohort(s).

Another way to look at Humanities Computing – and the reason why it is not seen as a coherent discipline by most – is to look at the research communities which group themselves around various paradigms. In our opinion, the following communities can be clearly distinguished.

1. Analysis of "texts":
   1. Literary Computing.
   2. Computer Linguistics.
2. Analysis of "facts":
   1. Quantitative / data base driven social science analysis / historical computing.

2. GIS focused subcommunity.
3. Simulation oriented sub community.

3. Analysis of non textual information:

1. "Visual disciplines".
2. Cultural heritage.

4. Humanities Computer Science:

1. Algorithmic orientation.
2. Epistemology of Humanities information.

These communities are not only separated intellectually by the focus of their interest, but also by their institutional surroundings, which usually means that they are organized in completely independent discourses. More mundanely: they are not aware of each other, as they visit separate conference series and publish in separate media.

This leads on the one hand to a deplorable lack of generalization: too many concepts, which could be used well beyond one of these discourses never are known beyond its limits. On the other hand, as these communities are separate, their members are often experiencing themselves as members of a very small community, while they are actually part of a much larger field.

While it is, of course, not possible to predict what the next technology will be, which might start a fifth wave, there are some reasons to believe that some candidate technologies exist. They might arise out of the increasingly closer integration of so far separate media; they might come from a collapse of prices of high quality visualization; they might appear from the fact that for the first time huge amounts of data relevant for the Humanities could be digitized outside of the disciplines using them.

The presentation explores possibilities to connect the identified communities more strongly in the future.