Anthropology between Book and Blog

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March, 2015

Anthropology between Book and Blog – Evaluation Criteria and Communication in Academia.

Talk on the Occasion of [Allegra Lab's Website Relaunch](#) in Berlin at the Finnish Institute
19 February 2015

I decided to embed my thoughts on productivity in the academic world – both traditional and digital – in the context of a debate that is old, but apparently not outdated. This is the debate about the type of knowledge the humanities are able to produce. This year, a [Humanities World Report (HWR)](#) was published in which the three authors – among them the historian Arne Jarrick, who is currently running a project on the long-term global history of law-making – advocated two things that are of relevance to us here today: one, that scholars in the humanities should strive towards strengthening international and interdisciplinary cluster formation where larger thematic complexes can be discussed. Second, they argued that just as in all the other sciences, the goal of the humanities should be "truth finding."

I will deal with the first proposition first as I think that – worded in this way – this is what Allegra Lab has been doing so far and intends to continue doing in the future: providing an integrative research platform. But according to the report, the most dominant form of such international cooperation comes in the form of Digital Humanities (DH). What is meant by this term is somewhat opaque, as that field is quite diverse. Its most institutionalised manifestations are the so-called Digital Humanities Centres (DHC) which, according to the authors of the report, deal with the following five fields of research:

1) Digital collections, archiving and text encoding

2) Reading and analysing electronic texts

3) Geospatial and critical discursive mapping technologies

4) 'Big Data', social computing, crowd-sourcing, and networking and

5) 3D immersive visualisation environments

The authors estimate that there are around 65 Digital Humanities Centres in Europe with 19 centres in England alone, the largest being the University College London Centre for Digital Humanities, "staffed with six directors, ten staff, student, and liaison positions, ten affiliated faculty, and 13 or more affiliated graduate students." (p. 67). The US has approximately 60 DH centres with world-leading facilities, such as the Harvard University of Digital Arts and Humanities (DARTH), or the Columbia University Digital Humanities Center (DHC).

Scholars carrying out qualitative work within the field of DH, or investigating the impact of digitalisation in people's everyday lives, have criticised the institutionalisation of these centres and the type of data they are dealing with. They have raised their voices mainly against the *lack of cultural criticism* in the digital humanities. One such critical voice comes from Alan Lui (2012) of the Department of English at the University of Santa Barbara in the US. He says: "How the digital humanities advance, channel, or resist the great postindustrial, neoliberal, corporatist, and globalist flows of information-cum-capital, for instance, is a question rarely heard in the digital humanities associations, conferences, journals, and projects..." Equally under-debated is how new techniques in the digital humanities such as "distant reading" (Moretti 2000), or "culturomics" (Michel, Shen et.al. 2010), both quantitative computational methods of processing millions of digitised books across centuries, impact on traditional ways of *close reading*, thereby turning the very object of analysis – text – from a form of human expression into a source of (Big) Data.

A form of human expression or a source of (Big) Data?

The authors of the Humanities World Report (HWR) argue that "[t]he skepticism and even outright hostility to digital humanities *evidenced by some blog literature* might be a unique phenomenon within the humanities" (emphasis added). They continue to wonder: "Strangely, much of this debate is not published but *articulated* in blog posts and other short web-based forms, which do not encourage the writers to fully argue their case" (emphasis added). If we apply this statement to the work Allegra is doing – namely blogging – it means that blogging is understood by the makers of this encompassing report not as a form of publication, but as an "articulation." This does not sound bad at all, but it is then right away denounced as "limiting" and gets juxtaposed with "publication."

Now what is problem with that? Well, it shows us that even within the field of digital humanities there is an inclination towards traditional modes of publishing. What has been revolutionised are the digital methods with which data can be collected, archived, processed, and analysed. What has not been revolutionised, apparently, is the way in which this sort of new and often "Big Data" is then published and /or debated. The reason for this is no secret and here critical voices from within digital humanities as well as those coming from outside join in the laments: academia does not, by and large, recognise digital forms of publication. To publish digitally means taking a risk for researchers who are in the early stages of their career and have tenure track positions that come with specified evaluation criteria. This also includes, as I have shown, people working within DH, which apparently continue to focus on "traditional" ways of publication such as peer-reviewed journal articles and monographs. Online publications or engagement in digital networking can be mentioned in a scholar's self-report, but they are not key to the evaluation as such. They are also not of interest to the universities or research institutes in general: I received two emails recently asking me to fill in my last year's publications. In the drop-down list there were all sorts of possibilities mentioned, even non-textual based publications. But it was

impossible to register online journal publications, or photographs or films, for example. So again: what has become digital is the data processing, not the debate.

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This stance also has significant impact on obtaining funding for digital initiatives such as Allegra Lab. While there is ample money for digital technology, there seems to be little appreciation within traditional third party funding institutions of the potential benefits engendered by online platforms for publication. While I personally have succeeded, for example, in getting money from funding institutions for digital equipment such as cameras, voice recorders, and software programmes, the same institution did not see any value in financially supporting an online publication platform where young researchers could present their findings and engage in conversation.

The authors of the Humanities World Report (HWR) conclude their report by arguing that "[t]he real challenge of digital humanities still lies ahead in asking new research questions enabled by the technology, training researchers to identify and utilise the potential, and developing a critical sense of the explanatory power of new technologies" (p.83). This might be the case, but even after all of these challenges have been met, there still lies another, maybe even bigger challenge, namely to publish, disseminate and debate the results so obtained in an equally digitalised form. This will continue to pose a problem as long as young researchers, who are particularly prone to new digital ways of communication, are discouraged from publishing outside the established framework of journals and publishing houses.

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Homi Bhabha

I now come to the second point made by the authors of the report. They described the humanities, alongside all other sciences, as "truth seeking academic disciplines" (p. 184). Their assessment was challenged by Homi Bhabha recently at a conference organised by the Volkswagen Foundation in Hanover. Borrowing the term "thick ethical concept" from the British philosopher Bernard Williams, who developed it in his Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (1986), Bhabha referred to the humanities as the "thick concept of contingency, convergence and veracity" – notions he has stressed throughout his work on post-colonialism. The humanities are contingent because they are able to reflect upon their spatial and temporal situatedness, they are converging in the sense that they cut across disciplines and fields, and they strive towards veracity – and not truth.

I think one can apply Bhabha's characterisation to the type of work Allegra Lab has been carrying out and continues to strive for – both in terms of the texts our authors produce as well as in the way we go about circulating and discussing the knowledge so generated. The strength of academic blogging and other forms of digital networking lies in fulfilling these characteristics as outlined by Bhabha as being good as (and possibly even better than) traditional modes of publication. Our job as blogging anthropologists is to convince people out there that whether we read our texts closely or from a distance, they should be published digitally – and open access, of course – but this is another debate.

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