
Digital Humanities at Berkeley and the Digital Life Project

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“The Digital Life Project” at UC Berkeley aims to reframe how we define digital humanities by bringing critical analysis to every stage of a highly collaborative and distributed research process. Below, we provide three examples of how this work is evolving at UC Berkeley.

To begin, incidents in the #BlackLivesMatter social movement raised our collective awareness and compelled us to rethink the digital humanities landscape on campus. We realized that understandings of race were being shaped by the dissemination of footage, images, and words. In particular, the dissemination of images of racial violence through media has begun to change the nature of questions in scholarship on race. Questions can no longer overlook a focus on the structure of those sources of data. Furthermore, in this rapid shift, social media must be understood as an infrastructure of hybrid online + offline human existence (i.e., the digital life).

We might perceive the dystopia of digital life in the preponderance of disturbing images of brutality and oppression, an archive that many—including victims of that violence—wish to reclaim. Conversely, we might understand the utopia of digital life to entail the affordance for social media users to document and share their experiences, instantaneously share information, and recruit attention, assistance, and aid to individuals and groups in need. In focusing on the broad rubric of “digital life,” moreover, we want to

support both dialogue in the broader university community and plans for focused research on a range of issues.

The first example of research within The Digital Life Project is a collaborative endeavor that is embedded in a digital humanities, ethnic studies methods course. Professor Keith Feldman worked closely with both the Ethnic Studies Library and the D-Lab to implement this project that included 65 undergraduate students, two graduate students, and a postdoctoral fellow, in addition to library staff. Students worked with digitized field recordings of events at Berkeley from the late 1960s from the Yuen Archive. The structuring and coding of the audio data went back to (a) all of the students for their individual research papers; (b) the Ethnic Studies Library to help seed a Thesaurus for the Yuen archive; and (c) the public in the form of more user-friendly audio files housed on the Internet Archive. The project impacted multiple constituencies in both immediate and long-term ways. By the end of this course, students were able to historicize the emergence and transformation of the humanities as a field of knowledge, use computational methodologies to conduct research on race and ethnicity, practice various ways to read closely, critically, and against the grain, while at the same time being exposed to the affordances and challenges of digital humanities.

Next, we embarked on a groundbreaking initiative to track and monitor types of Internet-based hate: The Online Hate Index (OHI). The goal is to create a comparative analysis of the online locations, sources, and relationships, and motivations behind online hate targeting different populations. Because of the marked rise of xenophobia in America today, the first installment focused on anti-Latino immigrant sentiments; subsequent studies will examine different forms of targeted hate. The D-Lab provided guidance on designing and implementing a computational research methodology that employed Machine Learning. The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) provided specific information relating to anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, and anti-migrant populations and enabled the project findings to become actionable. In the future, ADL’s Center for Extremism and Center for Technology and Society will provide expertise on the online locations and characteristics of hate groups, in-house computing resources, and the techniques used to terrorize groups.

After one year of the Digital Life Project, we reflect upon the lessons learned in generating a new body of research through a highly distributed infrastructure

that optimizes (a) the knowledge of graduate students and staff consultants and (b) mentorship within working groups and research teams comprised of undergraduates, graduate students, postdocs, faculty, and staff. At the same time, we are keeping our sights on mobilizing activism in order to foment an activist/researcher stance. Our collaboratory research work clearly defines roles and tasks within the research teams and thereby provides much needed apprenticeship opportunities that underrepresented minorities lack.

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