

Collaboration, Reward and the Digital Humanities: Reply to Nyhan
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In her reply to my paper “Digital Collaboration and Scholarly Labor in Literary Studies” (2015), Julianne Nyhan (2015) suggests that Digital Humanities (DH) is a fundamentally collaborative discipline. Bringing digital project work to closure often requires tightly coordinated teamwork of individuals with very different skill sets, e.g. coders, data workers, designers, scholars. Questions of collaboration and reward feature prominently in the recent discourse of DH, often as part of a reflection about the role of digital methods in an academic culture that primarily values written output (see for example Flanders, 2011). Against this background it is surprising to find that multi-authorship of papers within DH is not particularly common.

On the basis of a bibliometric analysis, Nyhan demonstrates that core journals such as *Computers and the Humanities* and *Literary & Linguistic Computing* featured relatively few contributions written by more than one author over the last decades. She suggests that more research and reflection on actual practices of collaborative work in digitally mediated scholarship is necessary, both to better understand the seeming disparity between discourse and practice, and to promote fairer ways of dividing credit for scholarly achievement. I agree with Nyhan’s call, and I would like to use the remainder of this contribution to discuss a few conceptual and practical aspects that such research should take into account.

On Collaboration and Epistemic Cultures

Firstly, I suggest that it is important to operate with a historically and culturally specific understanding of ‘collaboration’. What exactly this category means in a given area of study cannot be defined *a priori*, but has to take into account historically developed community norms. Sometimes, these norms are overtly unfair and biased towards gender or rank within a professional hierarchy, as in the case of the female keypunch operators that Fr. Roberto Busa employed to turn the writings of St. Thomas into a machine-readable format. (This practice by the way parallels the role of the female clerical workers in analyzing the bubble chamber data of 1950s particle physics, as famously described by Galison (1997)).

At the same time we, as analysts, should always be careful to appreciate that particular epistemic cultures may have distinct definitions of collaborative work, and that these may simply not coincide with our own understanding. For example, we should abstain from picturing ‘lone scholarship’ in the humanities as the opposite of collaboration. Scholars in traditional, monograph-oriented areas of study primarily publish as single authors. At the same time they constantly read, review, and reply to each other’s work, both formally by citing each other, and informally by attending presentations or commenting on draft chapters by colleagues. In other words, monograph-oriented scholarship is highly collaborative, but not according to the model of, say, laboratory-based natural sciences.

Conversely, it would be a questionable strategy to try and enforce an unqualified notion of collaboration in a top-down way. European science administrators and policy makers

for example have recurrently encouraged the humanities to emulate collaborative formats of the natural sciences, i.e. large teams of researchers working on very specific problems. The underlying assumption is that concentrating resources in such a way would create added value, as well as help the humanities to overcome their (perceived) organizational ‘fragmentation’ (European Research Advisory Board, 2004). Anecdotal evidence I collected in the course of my fieldwork suggests, however, that policy initiatives of this sort are often perceived as a technocratic intervention by practitioners, and that they may sometimes even tend to undermine existing forms of collaboration if actually put into practice.

A second caveat consists in appreciating the principal need for epistemic cultures to operate with a context-dependent definition of ‘intellectual work’ and ‘technical work’. I would suggest that any modern academic discipline necessarily distinguishes the two for reasons of organizational efficiency. Thus, a distinction between laboratory technicians and research scientists in the natural sciences is a way of creating fungibility of expertise within a highly differentiated ecology of tasks. In the humanities, a similar distinction exists between the work of bibliographers and librarians on the one hand, and researchers on the other. This does not mean that it is ever possible to actually separate intellectual aspects from technical ones—particular ways of marking up data for example always facilitate certain methods and modes of theorizing. I would suggest that such division of labor is unproblematic if the relation between technical and intellectual tasks is well defined and widely understood by the members of an epistemic culture, and as long as technical work is properly compensated in symbolic and/or financial terms.

A related, third aspect that we should take into account is the relative stability of an epistemic culture. In fact, how the boundary between technical and intellectual tasks in a field is drawn has immediate implications for how its practitioners conceptualize their object of study. Defining something as purely technical is another way of saying that it can be safely delegated to non-researchers. Yet in the case of scholarly or scientific fields that are undergoing some form of praxeological reorganization, researchers may not actually agree how exactly the object of study should be defined and analyzed. In such cases, arguments about how to draw the boundary between technical and intellectual work can function as a prism through which actors indirectly negotiate consequential epistemic questions. As both my own paper and Nyhan’s ongoing research suggests, the function and status of digital work in traditional humanities contexts is still unclear.

Delegating to the Digital

Humanists who are firmly invested in monograph-oriented scholarship have a certain stake in maintaining the status quo—both in the sense that recognition of their scholarly achievements and reputation depends on a disciplinary framework of established methods, and in the sense that learning new methods entails considerable transaction costs in terms of skill development and experimentation. In turn, established academics who delegate ‘everything digital’ to junior scholars may often not know what it is that they are delegating. Insofar as such tasks may have unexplored intellectual implications, delegation of technical work thus can amount to giving up intellectual control over a still emerging scholarly paradigm. The changing general level of digital skills in the

humanities is likely to play a role here, to be sure. Lack of a computational tradition in most humanistic disciplines implies a significant barrier to entry for digital novices, but as a younger generation of scholars enters the professoriate, the tendency to draw a sharp boundary around technical tasks may decrease.

Finally, it is important to reflect on how modalities of research evaluation and academic employment mediate collaboration and reward practices. For example, although the general level of digital skills among scholars may gradually increase, tenured research positions are likely to remain scarce and therefore highly competitive. We may therefore see an increasing specialization of the credentials that are needed to attain tenure, not least because the gate keepers of academic employment will often be scholars who are themselves firmly invested in established methods and conceptual approaches. Research grants on the other hand tend to value exceptional individual achievements.

For example, ERC grants are usually awarded to up-and-coming star researchers, but not to collectives. This, I suggest, begs an effort to create/ensure diversity of academic CVs. A main instrument through which to accomplish such diversification could be context-sensitive evaluation criteria. Research assessment entails formalizing notions of ‘proper’ research for administrative purposes, albeit often in ways that performatively affect the behavior of academics. For example, many institutional evaluation practices tend to value number and ‘impact’ of publications above all, thereby encouraging researchers to concentrate their efforts on this specific aspect of their work (Dahler-Larsen, 2012). Particular problems may arise if evaluation criteria are not well suited to the characteristics of the disciplines in question, e.g. if publications in peer-reviewed journals are used as a yardstick in fields that are historically characterized by a monograph-oriented publication culture.

I would suggest that evaluation could also serve a different function, however—rather than forcing researchers to ‘score’ high on a singular performance indicator, it could actually be used to prevent intellectual and practical overspecialization. This could be accomplished by granting researchers more leeway to choose the criteria according to which they would like to be assessed. A variety of recent initiatives to promote such tailor-made evaluation practices—for example the recent Standard Evaluation Protocol issued by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts & Sciences—would seem to signal a positive development in this respect (KNAW, 2014; see also Wouters et al., 2010).

As this short contribution demonstrates, normative reflection on how to organize reward systems in collaborative academic work should always draw on empirical research on situated research practices. It is only on such a basis that the sometimes complex relations between authorship and the underlying organizational model of scholarly labor become clearly visible, and that ethical questions regarding credit can be properly framed in the first place.

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