

How useful is the emerging field of Digital History? Answer with reference to different consumers of 'history' and the examples we discussed in class.

There is no doubt that the emerging field of Digital History is highly useful. In brief, it allows for another avenue of publishing for historical publication, and it breaks down the barriers between the general public and the research of professional academia leading to the wider public being more interested in history. These barriers take the form of language, vocabulary and style that are typical of professional academia but at odds with the general public. While digital history helps break down these barriers it must also be noted that Digital History is still subject to the limitations of the digital age as shown by the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the forced reliance on computer technology and its imperfect nature. This aside, it is clear the field of digital history is extremely useful.

The first way that digital history is useful is because it breaks down the barriers that exist in academia between the wider public and professional academics. This is evidenced by the project city witness and the work it did to explore medieval Swansea. City Witness is “major, cross-institutional, multi-discipline research project”¹. Furthermore, the project team features staff from multiple Russell Group universities such as Queens University Belfast, University of Southampton and Kings College London.² This shows that City Witness is a highly researched academic product. However, due to its nature, it also serves to function as a bridge between academic research and public interaction. City Witness is successful in this function because it conveys the research in a fun and engaging way. This is shown by the fact that the City Witness site features an interactive game³ in which the user explores the city of medieval Swansea and speaks to witness about the death and supposed resurrection of one William Cragh. This allows younger visitors to the site to learn about the history while having fun. This tackles one of the issues that faces Digital History laid out by Svenson in his book *Big Digital Humanities* in which he writes “One of the key challenges for the digital humanities is the integration of critical and technological engagement.”⁴ Through the inclusion of the game City Witness clearly demonstrates an avenue for public engagement. This public engagement is carried over into the real world with the inclusion of numerous Digital History tours around Swansea⁵. These tours help with public engagement as it allows for people to explore the cities history at their own pace. Furthermore, the fact that the information for the tours’ waypoints is online means that people can partake in historical education without paying the extortionate fees that come with visiting national trust properties or paying to access expensive journals. This goes to show that City Witness helps break down the various barriers between the public and well researched history by allowing the public to access the most prestigious levels of research in the county presented in a fun and entertaining way. This shows that Digital History is an incredibly useful field as City Witness demonstrates that it not only serves as an outlet for well

¹ “About: Medieval Swansea” <https://www.medievalswansea.ac.uk/en/information/index.html> [accessed date: 5.10.21]

² “Project Team: Medieval Swansea” <https://www.medievalswansea.ac.uk/en/information/project-team/index.html> [accessed date: 5.10.21]

³ “The Game: Medieval Swansea” <https://www.medievalswansea.ac.uk/en/game/index.html> [accessed date 6.10.21]

⁴ Patrik Svenson, *Big Digital Humanities: Imagining a Meeting Place for the Humanities and the Digital* (2016, Ann Arbor) P. vi

⁵ “Tours: Medieval Swansea” <https://www.medievalswansea.ac.uk/en/tours/index.html> [accessed date 6.10.21]

researched academia in the field of history, but it also serves as a vital method of public interaction and engagement.

On the other end of the Digital History spectrum there are the Digital History projects that are well researched pieces of academia but fail to engage the general public in any meaningful way. One such Digital History is Monastic Wales a database and website launched in 2009 with the aim of being used as both an aid for future research and for teaching⁶. While Monastic Wales is highly successful at its aims of being a teaching and research aid but fails in the wider aims of Digital History projects as laid out by the University of Sheffield which states the outputs of Digital History projects are to serve as “a medium for public engagement”⁷. This key aim of Digital History projects is important as it serves to break down the barriers between the public and professionals in academia. This aside, another feature of Digital History is its fluid and growing nature⁸. With this in mind Monastic Wales is incredibly useful as the Monastic Wales team has many future plans for the website including pages intended for use in schools and a version of the project in Welsh⁹. This shows that Digital History is a useful field as it is used as a method for teaching and presenting research in a way that makes the data easier to read and access. Furthermore, Monastic Wales’s use of google map¹⁰ integration allows for a sophisticated and easy user interface that allows for visitors to the site to not only see the monasteries in question in their geographical layout, it also allows the user to access the links to the monasteries individual entries in the database.

One way that Digital History projects might not be useful is the fact that Digital History projects are expensive to build and maintain costing around £100 per annum for simple websites and up to £10,000 per annum for larger more complicated websites¹¹. This when combined with the fear of budget cuts to university history departments¹² mean that many Digital History projects could be abandoned in favour of traditional academic research that does nothing to break down the barriers between the public and academia. This would mean that Digital History as a field would not be useful as the budget cuts to various university history departments would mean that Digital History would simply would not foster new projects. However, the sheer breaking of barriers and levels of public interaction that are generated by well made Digital History projects such as City Witness are worth the cost that it takes to build and maintain the website. This would show that Digital Histories are not a useful field because of the high costs involved with building and maintain a website when combined with the threatened budget cuts for university history departments mean that Digital History could simply be a dead-end avenue of research publication. Furthermore, Digital History is still somewhat stigmatized with many of the large drawbacks of the field being because of a lack of engagement with the wider academic community¹³. Furthermore, there is currently no way

⁶ “The Monastic Wales Project: Monastic Wales” <https://www.monasticwales.org/> [accessed date 7.10.21]

⁷ “What is a Digital Humanities project?: The Digital Humanities Institute: Sheffield” <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/what-is-a-digital-humanities-project/> [accessed date 7.10.21]

⁸ Patrik Svenson, *Big Digital Humanities: Imagining a Meeting Place for the Humanities and the Digital* (2016, Ann Arbor) P. 4

⁹ “Future Plans: Monastic Wales” <https://www.monasticwales.org/future-plans.php> [accessed date 7.10.21]

¹⁰ “Monastic Sites in the database: Monastic Wales” <https://www.monasticwales.org/listsites.php> [date accessed 8.10.21]

¹¹ Will Stevens “How much does it cost to build a website in the UK?” <https://uk.godaddy.com/blog/how-much-does-it-cost-to-build-a-website-uk/> [date accessed 8.10.21]

¹² Anna Fazackerley “Studying history should not be only for the elite, say academics” <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/may/01/studying-history-should-not-be-only-for-the-elite-say-academics> [date accessed 8.10.21]

¹³ Julie Thompson Klein *Interdisciplining Digital Humanities: Boundary Work in an Emerging field* (2015, Ann Arbor) P.40

to measure the academic contribution of a Digital Humanities project other than the level of community impact that it has. This shows that Digital History may not be a useful field because the output of Digital History research is not as respected as academic research as traditional academic research.

In conclusion, it is clear that Digital History is a vitally important field for the future of history as it helps break down the barriers between the public and professional academia. This shows that Digital History is a useful field because it allows for more public interaction with historical academia and allows members of the public to explore their interest further and possibly even join the student body of a university history department. The usefulness of digital history is also emphasised by Svenson when he writes: "growing realization inside and outside the academy that the digital, broadly conceived, matters intellectually, technologically, and humanly has created pressure on the field to be more strongly and diversely connected to the outside than in the past."¹⁴. This shows that the field of Digital History is a highly useful field as it helps tear down the barriers between the general public and professional academia.

Final word count: 1428

¹⁴ Patrik Svenson, *Big Digital Humanities: Imagining a Meeting Place for the Humanities and the Digital* (2016, Ann Arbor) PP. xi-xii

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