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French Perspectives on Digital Humanities: Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité?

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"French Perspectives on Digital Humanities: *Liberté, égalité, fraternité?"*

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Abstract:

In studying 'digital humanities', what might seem to be mainly technical or academic concerns prove to have real political implications. This paper discusses the infrastructure, methodology, and applications created by a new generation of researchers with the help of digital humanities which can help lend academia a new sense of purpose, rather than a purpose per se, by questioning the notions of literacy, accessibility, autonomy of thinking and learning at the heart of modern universities. Digital humanities may help rekindle academics' embattled feeling that they belong to a community (of learning, of thought). This paper also argues that new forms of research require new evaluation criteria which value collaboration and open access over competition and market-based point-scoring. Whether this can be achieved in France remains to be seen, but the freedom of expression, openness and responsiveness afforded by digital humanities might prove truly revolutionary, allowing "the people" to educate themselves despite every effort by policymakers to determine who and what should be taught.

Introduction

The symposium on the "epistemological paradigm shift for the Humanities" was an opportunity to discuss some of the issues raised by the open-source movement and so-called "hacktivism" in academia, notably in France.

Although I will be discussing access to knowledge, this paper will not be a sermon from the ivory tower—at least that is my hope. I am an early-modernist by trade whose purpose is to understand and analyze *the past*, but until recently I was also involved in thinking about *the future*... of academia, making practical, political and strategic choices in the field of Higher Education (Higher Ed), particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS). During my tenure as vice-president for communication of the University of Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense from 2009 to 2012, I strove to balance research and politics, past and future, and this paper will reflect this duality by depicting the two-way processes involved in research and digital humanities. Despite frequent claims that research in HSS does not "make" or "produce" anything,[202] studies show it has direct consequences on public policy, as citizens, the media, and politicians themselves learn to discuss and shape issues in the light of research in HSS.[203] Researchers, in other words, play a key political role which is often obscured by the cliché of the secluded academic dealing in arcane knowledge, such as that mocked by Swift with his Academy of Laputa in *Gulliver's Travels*.

If researchers in HSS change the world they live in, digital humanities affect *how* we do research, and consequently *what* we choose to research. I will not try to argue that digital humanities is a different, or newer, field of study. The advances made possible by digital humanities may be overblown, but their usefulness might lie elsewhere. In the words of Martin Mueller, "Implicit in the question [of the life-transforming power of digital humanities] is the idea that a new technology must legitimate itself with some spectacular breakthrough. But that may not be best way of measuring the impact of technology over time."[204] Rather, I first wish to insist on the fact that

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[202] As recently as this year, during a meeting of the Executive Board of my university, a Board member representing the 'business sector' called on faculty to focus on careers that were 'useful' rather than studying… Shakespeare. Elected faculty Board members sharply rebuked him for making such an inane remark, particularly ill-advised in a university specializing in HSS.

[203] Yan Brailowsky and Hervé Inglebert, eds., *1970-2010, les sciences de l'Homme en débat,* Nanterre: Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2013.

[204] Martin Mueller, "Stanley Fish and the Digital Humanities," Blog, *Center for Scholarly Communication & Digital Curation*, February 8, 2012, http://cscdc.northwestern.edu/blog/?p=332.

digital humanities involve an infrastructure, a methodology, and applications created by a new generation of researchers who both learn about, and teach with, these new tools, methodologies, applications etc. As I shall try to argue, this new generation and these new tools may help lend academia a new *sense* of purpose, rather than a purpose *per se,* by questioning anew the notions of literacy, accessibility, autonomy of thinking and learning at the heart of modern universities. Digital humanities may thus help rekindle academics' embattled feeling that they belong to a community (of learning, of thought).

I. Digital Humanities: General issues and practical applications

Before pursuing the discussion further, I would like to clarify briefly what "Digital humanities" typically encompass by mentioning a few local (i.e. French) examples.

a. Global issues

Customarily, digital humanities refer to technological tools and advances—with their attendant limitations. True to the ethos of digital humanists, a number of resources are available online which introduce these tools to the lay reader, outlining notions from HTML to TEI, databases to modeling, data mining to interface theory, etc.[205] For the purposes of this paper, I will mention here only two broad issues.

The first concerns the ways knowledge is disseminated. Digital humanities have given rise to new forms of interaction between teachers and students, as well as between researchers: podcasting, E-seminars, web-conferencing, and what are now popularly called MOOCs (or Massive Open Online Courses, which are simply a newer version of widely-used Learning Management Systems).[206]

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[205] See, for instance, Johanna Drucker, "Introduction to Digital Humanties: Concepts, Methods, and Tutorials for Students and Instructors," LMS, *UCLA Center for Digital Humanities*, September 1, 2012, http://dh101.humanities.ucla.edu/.

[206] Arguably, institutional providers of MOOCs are now more interested in reaping the benefits of greater exposure in a competitive international "academic market" than in furthering the progress of knowledge and science. This is shown by universities such as Stanford who wish to defend their "brand", or by countries such as France whose minister of Higher Education clearly stated that the national MOOC platform inaugurated in October 2013 was a political move: "I want France to be a pioneer of this third revolution from which there is no turning back." ("Mon souhait est de faire de la France l'un des pionniers de cette troisième révolution dont le cours est irréversible.") See Steve Kolowich, "With Open Platform, Stanford Seeks to Reclaim MOOC Brand," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 4, 2013, http://chronicle.com/article/With-Open-Platform-Stanford/142783/; Geneviève

Not only do these new methods of dissemination combine different media or activities such as audio and visual material, reference works, and interactive activities (e.g. online tests), they also broaden their audience by making resources widely accessible and perhaps more amenable than traditional books and libraries. This said, as teachers around the world are quick to point out, the popularity of these new tools does not mean that they are more effective than their traditional forefathers. Online courses, however well-designed, featuring videos and interactive forums and tests, still suffer from sky-high drop-out rates.[207] In other words, the traditional teaching model with a bricks-and-mortar classroom and a teacher in the flesh still remains effective and dependable, even if the model is increasingly criticized. A political consequence of this fact is that education still requires adequate funding to hire teachers, and that class size *does* matter.

A second issue posed by digital humanities stems from their technical and legal innovations. Technical changes allowing users to combine and analyze different types of data (text, visual, audio/visual, filtered/unfiltered, unstructured/structured etc.) are usually hamstringed by issues of interoperability, as competing standards attempt to obscure perhaps lesser-known, but often equally useful or powerful systems and standards. Depending on the popularity and influence of certain companies or coding communities, some standards become dominant, regardless of their actual merits, much in the same way that Betamax lost the war against VHS in the early days of VCRs, even if VHS was of lower quality than its ill-fated rival. Similarly, new methods and standards can be limited by Intellectual Property (IP) issues, as standards and databases, or system components, are either open-source or proprietary. Given digital humanists' desire to share knowledge and collaborate, these IP issues are a regular stumbling block which push an ever greater number of academics towards finding open-source solutions.

b. French experiments

Fioraso, "France Université Numérique : construire l'Université de demain," MOOC, *France Université Numérique*, October 2, 2013, http://www.france-universite-numerique.fr/france-universite-numerique-construire-l-universite-de-demain.html.

[207] See, for instance, the reasons why one pioneer of online education software partly disavows the usefulness of MOOCs: Max Chafkin, "Udacity's Sebastian Thrun, Godfather Of Free Online Education, Changes Course," *Fast Company*, November 14, 2013, http://www.fastcompany.com/3021473/udacity-sebastian-thrun-uphill-climb.

In practice, experiments in the realm of digital humanities have taken different forms. In France, some deal with the storage and dissemination of knowledge, some concern topics of research chosen by academics, others in creating new infrastructure.

Among the first form, one can mention the creation of new repositories, such as in the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (BnF), as the national library attempts to find a system to properly archive and document *virtual* publications such as blogs, political party websites, online newspapers, and so on, to allow future researchers access to published material on the early twenty-first century.[208] Another repository has been developed recently by the *Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine* (BDIC) through a research project, "Labex Pasts in the present", to digitize scores of documents from Ancient to twentieth century history, from old medals to contemporary political placards.[209]

While these projects consist in creating databases for future research, a different approach consists in studying the *effects* of digital media on society, as well as finding new uses for digitized knowledge. At the University of Paris Ouest, this was the founding objective of ECRIN, an Institute for digital studies.[210] Although the project eventually foundered due to a lack of funding after a change of leadership at the university, local business leaders had begun to discover new uses for old knowledge. One company treating radioactive waste began quizzing archaeologists on the best way to preserve their documentation in order to make sure that generations a thousand years from today would still be able to understand what had been done in the twentieth century, and how to deal with twentieth century nuclear waste. The company hoped to "reverse engineer" knowledge gained by contemporary archaeologists seeking to understand messages left by ancient Egyptians or defunct tribes such as Etruscans or Iberians.

A third experiment carried out in France concerns big infrastructure projects which neither create new knowledge nor re-catalogue old data, but which interconnect existing tools. This is the aim of

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208 See an article on the topic by the director of the BnF, Bruno Racine, "Les sciences sociales, le numérique et l'Internet," in Brailowsky and Inglebert, *1970-2010, les sciences de l'Homme en débat*, p. 239-246.

209 See the project's internet page for more details: http://passes-present.eu/en/labex/projects

210 http://ecrin.u-paris10.fr/

UnivCloud, a project led by the *Université numérique Paris Ile-de-France* to bring together the computing knowledge of French universities in the Paris area to "the cloud", further erasing physical boundaries between IT systems and institutions of Higher Ed. Launched in January 2012, the project has begun tests in October 2013.[211]

II. Technical or political? Activism and hacktivism

As suggested by the previous paragraphs, what seem to be mainly technical or academic concerns actually have real political implications. This is not surprising, as suggested by the history behind the FLOSS movement (Free/Libre Open Source Software), from the creation of the GNU project in 1984, to the Free Software Foundation (FSF), or the Open Source Initiative (OSI), to mention but a few.[212] As suggested by the FLOSS movement and by examples below, technology can be either a tool to free society from oppression, or to further its subordination.

In the world of academia, researchers are increasingly calling for the creation of new tools free from the constraints imposed by IP issues. Although one can compare the hordes of academic "drones" who are wholly dependent on the technology created by IT firms with hapless mass consumers, there exists a growing knowledgeable body of researchers who are well-versed in (open) software development. Certainly, the notion that the mass is still dependent on choices made by private IT firms is still the norm in HSS, where the majority of researchers still use and even require proprietary document formats (such as .doc) in their work. But the "hard" sciences provide proof that it is possible to work otherwise, as they frequently require researchers to work with open-source, cross-platform file formats (such as LaTeX), to guarantee that there are no IP or interoperability issues. This 'geek gap' is dwindling with time, as new generations of researchers in HSS embrace not only new technology, but also a new ethos, realizing that their independence and productivity as researchers is at stake. For university managers, the issue is also one of financial sustainability. A decade ago, American universities embraced proprietary

[211] For a corporate presentation of the UnivCloud project, see the project leader's website: http://unr-wp-ppd.univ-paris1.fr/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/broch-UNIVCloud-maquette-DEF2-simples.pdf

[212] On the philosophy of GNU, founded by Richard Stallman, see: https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/. On the FSF, see: http://www.fsf.org/about. On the OSI, see: http://opensource.org/osr

Learning Management Software such as Blackboard to allow students and lecturers to share material and work at a distance. The software mimicked the physical world by providing a mailbox and a blackboard to students and teachers, eliminating the need for these spaces in the physical world, speeding up the flow of information. A decade later, many universities have turned towards open-source software which provide the same basic functionalities such as Moodle. The move towards open-source is usually motivated by financial and strategic considerations: there are no licensing fees and universities are not locked into a system.[213]

Whether one is an active part of the IT community or only a client-researcher has drastic consequences on the sustainability of a research model, as client-researchers need to adapt to technological changes made by IT firms, while hactivist researchers adapt technology to fit their needs.

Ultimately, this "geek gap" illustrates the problems derived from the monetization of (digital) knowledge. As recalled by historian Jacques Le Goff, the knowledge "industry" has deep roots, as the professionalization of Higher Ed matured in the Middle Ages with the creation of the first "universities" in the thirteenth century, i.e. corporations or communities dedicated to teaching "universal" values.[214] In this corporate academic world, the relationship between teachers and students was problematic, as teachers lived off their students' tuition. This patronage system was criticized by clerics who felt that this monetization discredited the quality and purity of the knowledge they imparted. In later centuries, universities sought to avoid these conflicts of interest and corruption by charging students for registering at the university, rather than on a pay-per-class basis. Gradually, academia began to assert its independence from worldly concerns and to defend its "academic freedom", arguing that it was part and parcel of its humanist mission. This gave rise to the myth of the academic in an ivory tower. Academic freedom as we now know it came into existence only fairly recently, however, and even in the most progressive states, this freedom has

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[213] See, for instance, a list of affordable software (i.e. cheap, but not necessarily open-source) published by the CNRS: https://www.projet-plume.org/ ("Logiciels *Utiles*, Maîtrisés et *Économiques*", emphasis added — nowhere does the term "libre" appear as a critical factor).

[214] Jacques Le Goff, *Pour un autre Moyen Age : Temps, travail et culture en Occident*, NRF, Paris: Gallimard, 1977. On the etymology of the term "university", see the *OED* (Third Edition, Nov. 2010): "[from] Middle French *université* (French *université*) community, corporation (1214 in Old French; also in Old French as *universitei*, *universiteit*, etc.), totality, universality (13th cent.), body of masters and scholars engaged in giving and receiving instruction (1246), institution of higher education (*c*1255) […]".

always been under fire. An emblematic illustration came when UC Berkeley, the Californian public university, attempted to ban political discussion on its campus in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, giving rise to the Free Speech Movement in 1964.

Academic freedom cannot be reduced to an ideological issue, however. Technological tools have a direct bearing on academic freedom, enabling new forms of research or manipulating existing research into obedience or subservience. In this context, digital humanities have demonstrated the power of researchers to resist government propaganda. This was already true in the sense afforded by traditional, i.e. non-digital research in the Humanities, as researchers looked hard at facts — journalists call this "fact checking" — in order to separate wheat from chaff, information from propaganda. But by taking into account data mainly obtained and analyzed through digital means, researchers can analyze current events almost instantly, giving rise to what some call "just in time sociology".[215]

Following the 2011 London riots, for instance, British mainstream politicians and journalists warmed to the idea that Twitter and Facebook could prompt copycat rioters and that it was therefore necessary to impose a "cooling-off" period by denying users access to these social media in times of social upheaval. Critics of these plans pointed out the journalists' and government's double standards, as the UK had sharply criticized other, less democratic regimes for imposing similar restrictions, notably in Egypt during the weeks leading to the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak. Only the viewpoints shared by those in favor and those opposing social media were formulated mostly on questions of principle. Few studies existed which could test the efficacy of the proposed bill. With rigorous analysis of social and digital data, two sociologists quickly concluded that the British Prime Minister's project to curb freedom of speech in social media by imposing "virtual curfews" to quell social unrest would actually backfire, provoking additional violence.[216]

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[215] A blog is dedicated to this concept: http://jitso.org/

[216] A. A. Casilli and P. Tubaro, "Social Media Censorship in Times of Political Unrest - A Social Simulation Experiment with the UK Riots," *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology/Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique* 115, no. 1 (July 6, 2012): 5–20, doi:10.1177/0759106312445697. Similarly, one can expect new anti-demonstration bills being discussed in Canada and Spain at the time this article was written to fuel more, rather than less civil unrest and bouts of violence.

Other examples which show how digital humanities can make political statements in novel form include the "video essays" posted by Matthias Stork to denounce what he called the "chaos cinema" used by Hollywood and videogame developers today to overwhelm viewers with violence and special effects.[217] In this case, digital humanities allowed Stork to make his point in a more convincing manner than through a traditional print publication, thereby shedding light on issues of social and political import.

III. Policymaking vs polishing thinking

Given the increasing pressure on policymakers to seem to be "doing" something when faced with crises such as the London riots or issues such as violence in film and videogames, it is not surprising to see academic policymakers (ministry officials as well as university chancellors, deans, HR managers and so on) trying to "react" in the face of dismal results in global rankings and high attrition rates at public universities.[218] As with the example of "just in time sociology", however, efforts to rush through half-baked reforms have met not only with stiff opposition, but produced rather sobering results. French Universities which embarked early on the vaunted reforms led by the Sarkozy government and which were once hailed as shining examples of the future of Higher Ed are now on the brink of bankruptcy.

This suggests that recent reforms in Higher Ed in Europe highlight contradictory conceptions of what universities are meant to be. To illustrate this, I would like to return to three basic concepts which typically comprise a university: researchers, students and the university campus. As I shall try to show, these notions can be understood in wildly different ways, highlighting the differences between policymakers and academics.

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217 On "just in time sociology" and Stork's essay, see Pierre Mounier, "Qu'apportent Les Digital Humanities ? Quelques Exemples (1/2)," *L'Édition Électronique Ouverte*, October 7, 2011, http://leo.hypotheses.org/7598.

218 This obsession with university rankings persists despite ample evidence that they are fatally flawed. See, among others, Jean-Charles Billaut, Denis Bouyssou, and Philippe Vincke, "Faut-il croire le classement de Shangaï ?," *Revue de la régulation. Capitalisme, institutions, pouvoirs* no. 8 (December 14, 2010), http://regulation.revues.org/9016.

a. What is "research"?

Depending on whom you ask, the answer to the question: "what is research all about?" garners widely different answers. In the context of this paper, the question could be further narrowed according to whether one deals with researchers and policymakers who are digital natives, non-digital natives, or semi-digital natives (i.e. non-digital natives who embraced digital technologies early on).

Research may be defined as a process, in which case it is an intellectual pursuit; or it can be considered as an activity aimed at achieving results, in which case it is meant to "produce" knowledge—or "deliverables" in consultant-speak used by most grantmakers. In the past few decades, policymakers have tended to emphasize the latter. This conception is best illustrated in a 1991 study by Sir Douglas Hague, an economics professor and advisor to Margaret Thatcher, who argued that universities needed to transition from "Mode I", in which *researchers* ask questions and test their hypotheses, to "Mode II", where it is *society* asking questions to researchers.[219] The two positions need not be antithetical, but they are based on different models. The former needs time and freedom — among others, the freedom to fail to "find" anything —, the second expects quantifiable results to justify the expenses incurred in the research process.

The digital age has made it easier to transition towards "Mode II", as it has become easier to quantify results and to determine whether research has an "impact". The "impact factor" of published research is based on automated calculations on the number of times a given paper is quoted by others, much as Google's "pagerank" calculates the relevance of a link based on the number of times it is mentioned by other websites.[220]

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[219] Douglas Chalmers Hague, *Beyond Universities : A New Republic of the Intellect* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1991). See also a useful review of a recent book critical of Hague's position: Bernard Gensane, "*Le Cauchemar de Humboldt* de Franz Schultheis," *Le Grand Soir*, September 23, 2008, http://www.legrandsoir.info/Le-cauchemar-de-Humboldt.html.

[220] For definitions of a paper's "impact factor", see, among others, http://admin-apps.webofknowledge.com/JCR/help/h_impfact.htm. For a critical study of this system of ranking or evaluation, see Evgeny Abakumov et al., "Compter et mesurer. Réflexions sur le souci du nombre dans l'évaluation de la production du savoir scientifique," 2010, http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00533570; Sylvain Piron, "Lisons Peter Lawrence, ou les implications morales de l'évaluation bibliométrique," *Évaluation de la Recherche en SHS*, December 6, 2008, http://evaluation.hypotheses.org/229.

The problem is that these seemingly "objective" quantitative methods of evaluation are not only illusory, they also highlight the discrepancy between the "hard" and the "social" sciences. Whereas hard sciences can often quantify the results of experiments and provide factual conclusions, researchers in HSS are generally more often interested in the process, rather than on the "result", of a study. There is more: the language used to communicate "results" also skews the objectivity of a paper's "impact factor" as English has become the *lingua franca* in the hard sciences, while much of the research carried out in HSS is culture-specific. As a consequence, valuable research published in languages other than English are undervalued at a global level, feeding the illusion that this research is less important than that produced by English-speaking peers. In this context, digital humanities *can* be a tool of oppression, favoring those who were the first to create and impose certain heuristic models. Contrariwise, if a sufficient number of fellow-minded researchers use digital humanities to make certain findings better known, they can be a tool of progress.

Ultimately, the problem is that given that knowledge has been monetized, the digital age allows it to become a commodity. Worse: it is not enough to need to *use* knowledge to make money, knowledge must be *produced* in increasing quantities to gain market share in a global market. In this system of commodity exchange, Higher Ed pits educators/researchers against each other, rather than encouraging them to share results, methods and technologies. Nowhere is this rivalry more keenly felt than in bids to obtain research grants, a system increasingly relied on to dole out research money. In the words of George Monbiot in an opinion piece published in *The Guardian,* "our universities are being turned into corporate research departments. No longer may they pursue knowledge for its own sake: the highest ambition to which they must aspire is finding better ways to make money […] all researchers will be aware that the business of universities is business."[221]

b. What is "learning"?

Just as the conception of what makes research differs according to viewpoints (managers vs researchers, taxpayers vs civil servants…), learning processes can also be contrasted. There are many ways to describe this: one cognitive process may be anecdotal, the other methodical. While

[221] George Monbiot, "These Men Would've Stopped Darwin," *The Guardian*, May 11, 2009, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/may/11/science-research-business.

in the former case, a student achieves learning haphazardly, picking topics according to immediate interests or preoccupations, the latter structures the learning process with building blocks: each block of learning is the basis for another block, until the student achieves proficiency in a pre-determined field. A different terminology is used by N. Katherine Hayles for whom new generations of students are adopting new "cognitive styles". Digital natives shy away from the "deep attention, the cognitive style traditionally associated with the humanities, […] characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods", she argues, while "Hyper attention [is] characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation".[222] The different cognitive models need not be mutually exclusive. In one experiment described by Hayles, the traditional lecture format was turned into an opportunity for listeners to comment and build upon the issues discussed by the lecturer as the lecture progressed using digital media. The result was a lecture that prompted listeners to *think*, rather than simply to *record* data which could later be assessed by traditional testing methods.

Studies on the differences student- and lecturer-oriented teaching suggest that each model has its advantages and shortcomings. There is, however, an increasing agreement among educators that the principle of competition—an axiom of free-market capitalism—cannot be applied to the classroom unexamined. Although rivalry might incentivize some people to become better than their peers, researchers have noticed that students, just as academics, do not thrive *as a group* through competition. Rather than imposing regular testing as is currently the norm in most OECD countries, neutral learning environments may prove more successful. In an article published in the *Atlantic*, one journalist showed how Finland's education system's success, which wins plaudits among experts and achieves high test scores, "is not competition between teachers and between schools, but cooperation."[223] A similar argument has been made recently by a school teacher in Mexico who tried an experiment he had read about online: he left his pupils, who all came from a very poor neighborhood, to learn *on their own terms,* giving them minimal guidance. The students

[222] N. Katherine Hayles, "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes," *Profession* (2007): 187–199. Quote p. 187.

[223] Anu Partanen, "What Americans Keep Ignoring About Finland's School Success," *The Atlantic*, December 29, 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/12/what-americans-keep-ignoring-about-finlands-school-success/250564/.

achieved record results at national-level test scores.[224] By allowing students to study with the help of mass-market digital tools in an evaluation and competition-free, neutral environment, students may surprise educators, policymakers and ordinary citizens.

c. What is a "campus"?

If students can learn on their own with the internet and minimal intervention from teachers, does this mean that the classroom has become a relic, and universities an expensive and outdated learning model? Paradoxically, the increasing virtualization of teaching and research may actually be contributing to reinforcing the need for shared physical spaces. In many respects, the most palpable existence of a university is neither its faculty, nor its students or alumni, but the physical space, the buildings, classrooms and offices in which the university's dual mission or teaching and learning is carried out.

While digital natives are increasingly vocal in *expecting* knowledge to be accessible by digital means, and while investments are made to develop digital tools to access and analyze this knowledge, most undergraduates still expect their university experience to mirror that portrayed in Hollywood movies or TV series, with campuses, libraries, classrooms… and, more importantly, classmates. Much as virtual communication technologies have not yet managed to make business travel a thing of the past, students still profit from meeting with other students. Even if increasingly little time is actually spent on campus, or pursuing the traditional activities associated with a college education, such as reading or studying,[225] students and teachers still expect the campus, and the classroom, to *exist*.

In this context, one can wonder what the differences are between a "virtual" and a "physical" campus, between a "virtual" and "physical" classroom, between distance and on-site learning. I would like to argue that the difference is one of market-value. In the digital age, campuses and on-

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[224] Joshua Davis, "How a Radical New Teaching Method Could Unleash a Generation of Geniuses," *Wired.com*, October 15, 2013, http://www.wired.com/business/2013/10/free-thinkers/.

[225] Studies show that the hours of reading per week have dropped continuously in the last four decades. See Anthony Grafton, "Our Universities: Why Are They Failing?," *The New York Review of Books*, November 24, 2011, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/nov/24/our-universities-why-are-they-failing/.

site classes matter: they are valuable, marketable assets. While many universities claim to be trying to foster open access to knowledge by putting an increasing number of resources online (from syllabi to full-fledged lessons through MOOCs or podcasts), the vast majority maintain closed campuses to ward off intruders.[226] Does this suggest that campuses are the last remaining sign that there *is* an elite relying on a system inherited from the Middle Ages to preserve itself from the outside world and from outsiders? Or should this prompt us to reflect anew on the meaning of a university "campus", originally defined as "the *open space* between or around the buildings; a *separate* part of a university" (*OED,* emphasis mine)? Should campuses be allowed to be privatized or cordoned off?

Conclusion

According to Stanley Fish, "Higher education is no longer conceived of as a public good — as a good the effects of which permeate society — but is rather a private benefit, and as such it should be supported by those who enjoy the benefit."[227] In fact, as I have tried to argue, this humanist conception of Higher Ed is rather new, and mostly the product of the post-war Welfare State. Universities have long been, and in many cases seem to wish to remain, places of learning with contradictory aims which try to promote "universal" knowledge while attending to a minority undergoing specialized training. Arguably, given the success of experiments in student-led or collaborative learning, the greater risk for society is the privatization of *knowledge,* rather than education,[228] and the subservience of education to the business community.

This is why one particular (de)pressing concern resides in the continued efforts from public authorities, such as the French Ministry of Higher Education, to impose a business approach to university degrees, as illustrated by the publication on August 1, 2011 of a decree requiring that

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[226] It has become evident, I hope, that by "campus" I mean the buildings, classrooms and libraries that make up a university. Many of these are open to auditors, to some extent, but no university advertizes this possibility as a matter of policy.

[227] Stanley Fish, "The Value of Higher Education Made Literal," *Opinionator - The New York Times Online*, December 13, 2010, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/13/the-value-of-higher-education-made-literal.

[228] In the world of hackers, the danger is defined in similar terms. According to Pekka Himanen, "[Richard] Stallman's version of the hacker money ethic does not oppose *making money,* just making money *by closing off information from others*." Pekka Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic: And the Spirit of the Information Age* (London: Vintage, 2001), 59.

degrees list the skills which students are supposed to acquire. Rather than allowing universities to *create* the future, this competency-based market approach adapts Higher Ed to the existing world, paradoxically guaranteeing that future generations of French workers will *not* be in a position to innovate.[229] In other words, despite calls for universities to educate the workforce of the future, they will only be reproducing that of the past.

The perils of this vicious circle of market-oriented standardization have also been pointed out as one of the unintended consequences of the Bologna Process which created the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Rather than building on the strengths of each system of Higher Education by exploiting their idiosyncrasies, EHEA has been dumbing down the system to the lowest common denominator in the hope of creating a common "market" in which students can shop. Given all this, Europeans should not be surprised if, in a generation, undergraduates suffer from the same lack of critical thinking which plagues colleges in the United States, where 45% of undergraduates make no progress in critical thinking in college in 2 years, and 36% in 4 years.[230]

Will digital humanities save universities? Perhaps the question should be rephrased as: will universities *allow* digital humanities to extend a helping hand? As suggested by a recent collection on *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2012), "Digital Humanities" have been the subject of too much media attention, triggering a critical backlash among "traditionalist" researchers who perceive them with disdain, rather than embracing digital humanists' call to rekindle the collaborative spirit among researchers.[231] One particular issue is the scientific recognition of new forms of work carried out by digital humanists, which have led one group to issue recently a "manifesto for Digital humanities". They argue that "The widening gap between flourishing digital practices and their institutional acknowledgment represent a threat for the academic community as a whole and for young scholars in particular", and call for the recognition of the scientific worth

[229] The same dismal conclusion is reached by Stefan Collini, "Sold Out," *London Review of Books* 35, no. 20 (October 24, 2013): 3–12.

[230] According to Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), quoted by Grafton, "Our Universities."

[231] Jennifer Howard, "Dilemmas of the Digital Humanists," *TLS*, August 8, 2012, http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1099163.ece.

of academic blog posts, social media, encoding, website management, etc. by academics and funding institutions alike.[232]

New forms of research should require new evaluation criteria which could value collaboration and open access over competition and market-based point-scoring. Whether this can be achieved in France might be complicated by several factors: France's reliance on segregated educational systems in which elite *Grandes Écoles* compete with universities for funding and the brightest students; the country's taste for Jacobin politics which produce standardization and disastrous top-bottom policies; and the predominance of "groupthink" among the ruling elite. A few heads will need to roll before universities can regain some poise and independence. In this bleak context, the freedom of expression, openness and responsiveness afforded by digital humanities might prove truly revolutionary, allowing "the people" to educate *themselves* despite every effort by policymakers to determine who and what should be taught. Arguably, the empowering change fostered by digital humanities will allow twenty-first century universities to live up to the famed motto of the French revolution: *Liberté, égalité, fraternité.*

[232] See "Young Researchers in Digital Humanities: A Manifesto," *Digital humanities Am DHIP*, July 4, 2013, http://dhdhi.hypotheses.org/1855.