

Never Neutral: Critical Approaches to Digital Tools & Culture in the Humanities

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"But technology is never neutral and I'm starting to see pause and critique as part of my charge, too."

This opening quote is from [Robin Camille Davis](#), Emerging Technologies & Distance Services Librarian at John Jay College of Criminal Justice at CUNY. An "Emerging Technologies Librarian" is one of several digital librarian positions that have come into existence over the last decade or so in academic libraries, including Digital Services Librarian, Digital Humanities Librarian, Digital Scholarship Librarian, and others. All of these positions, more or less, are tasked with confronting a vast ecosystem of digital tools and methods for a variety of purposes from doing library outreach via popular social media platforms to collaborating with scholars working with obscure digital research tools. It's a drastically difficult task, especially for positions that rarely have much further support outside of their own singular job description. And, yet, it's an eminently vital task, as digital technologies proliferate and penetrate, privacy concerns are obscured and eroded, tech discourse dominates everything from our daily lives to popular politics, and as disciplines in the humanities struggle to discuss, engage, use, and critique digital tools.

Davis [was responding](#) to a post published on the radical librarian blog Librarian Shipwreck, titled [“Will Technological Critique Emerge with Emerging Technology Librarians?”](#) The author of this post—who goes by name Luddbrarian, derived from Ned Ludd, whose actions inspired the Luddites—wonders if as these digital librarian positions evolve, will those in them embrace critical thinking about digital technology in addition to their research, selection, curation and implementation of various digital technologies, platforms, and tools. This is an anxiety we’ve also seen in digital humanities, elaborated, to some extent, in collections such as Matthew Gold’s [Debates in the Digital Humanities](#) and, increasingly and more to the point, in online conversations and conference panels, and in blog posts like Michael Widner’s [“The Digital Humanists’ \(Lack of\) Response to the Surveillance State.”](#) This question that’s been put to librarians—will technological critique emerge with the emergence of digital librarianship—is important for us to also ask of the humanities more broadly. But why, one might wonder, is this important?

Californian Ideology

In a talk at MLA 2011 that’s since been published in the aforementioned [Debates in the Digital Humanities](#), Alan Liu asked [“Where is Cultural Criticism in Digital Humanities?”](#) As Liu rightly asserts in relation to DH, the goal of a digital criticism is “to think critically about metadata (and everything else related to digital technologies) in a way that scales into thinking critically about the power, finance, and other governance protocols of the world.” One of my goals for this talk is to attempt to build upon Liu’s essay by continuing to slowly move the conversation forward, not just in a call for an increase in theory within the digital humanities, but in a modest move toward a critical digital praxis. Like Liu, I’d argue that a critical eye toward technology is a critical eye toward culture. That is, to look critically at digital technology is necessarily to look critically at the culture that created it and to consider how these tools might further perpetuate, exacerbate, alleviate, complicate, or undo existing practices, from the social to the scholarly. As Tartleton Gillespie writes in [“The Stories Digital Tools Tell,”](#) “A look to the artifact must quickly look beyond, to see its engagement with communities of people, cultures of practice, institutional and social contexts, and discursive landscapes.” If we start from these premises, then the problem becomes how do we, humanists, look at, to and beyond our

digital tools? We'll address this later, but first we also need to understand why such a praxis is necessary in the first place.

The relevance and importance of this, I believe, cannot be overstated, not just for so-called digital librarians and humanists, but everyone across the digital divide. As early as 1995, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron were critiquing what they called [“the Californian Ideology.”](#) “a mix of cybernetics, free market economics, and counterculture libertarianism;” an ideology powered by technological determinism and the seemingly Leftist belief in techno-utopianism. (And if you object to that description, just know that Barbrook and Cameron call it “a digital nirvana inhabited solely by liberal psychopaths.”) What in 1995 was being described by its most vociferous critics as “an emerging global orthodoxy,” has since come to be the leading ideology of a hegemonic Western culture. And it's a privileged, neoliberal, cyber-libertarian ideology that continues to mostly remain hostile to the race, gender, and class experiences of those outside the hegemonic white, wealthy, and vastly powerful Venture Capitalist class that supports it; its alt-capitol, Silicon Valley, home of Government 2.0.

Since [at least the 1960s](#), the rise of this venture capital-funded deterministic technocracy has been [accepted, funded, actively promoted and further developed by research universities and academic libraries](#), as administrators and researchers implement what Evgeny Morozov has dubbed [“solutionism.”](#) the belief that supposedly novel digital technologies will, through quick, unthinking application, solve pressing social, economic and political problems that may or may not even be problems in the first place. With calls for “innovation” and “disruption” bountifully buzzing about—often as if utterance alone could bring about change—the solutionism affecting higher education is really no more than the Californian Ideology made manifest through austerity measures, best exemplified, of course, by MOOCs.

However, along with scholars and graduate students across the disciplines in the humanities, some digital librarians, like Davis, are rejecting the fast-paced, techno-utopian allure and, instead, further activating the humanistic tradition of librarianship that demands we think critically about digital technologies in much the same way it's done for decades with sources, and the organization, of information. So, it is in this context that I'd like to take steps toward outlining and elaborating a modest praxis for humanities-based understanding and critique of digital tools and culture, that might be seen as situated within the realms of digital humanities and

library-centric curation practices. More specifically, I'd like to do three things: (1) discuss “digital humanities” and interdisciplinary interventions; (2) begin to address the importance of humanists confronting digital technology; and (3) provide some concrete ways for approaching, understanding, and critiquing digital tools. It's my hope to show that the critical curation of digital tools is an essential practice and mode of self-criticism in digital humanities, as well as a way of engaging with issues of race, gender, and class, and confronting structures of power.

Digital Humanities

In [“A Guide to Digital Humanities.”](#) I grapple with some of the literature that's worked to define DH. After reading and synthesizing many of these (there are, in actual existence, and [on a single website](#) no less, over 500), I've arrived at a description of DH that embraces multiplicity, and arrives at five broad “categories” of digital humanities work that mark it as a humanistic field of engagement with digital technologies. The following five “categories” are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and they tend to, despite some popular rhetoric of DH as a revolutionary break from all things past, augment works of long-established disciplinary scholarship and print-based practices—humanistic research, teaching, and publishing that is:

- presented in digital form(s)
- enabled by digital methods & tools
- about digital technology & culture
- building and experimenting with digital technology
- critical of its own digital-ness

The shapes of these categories are, of course, fluid, porous and constantly changing; they also involve many disciplines, from those traditionally associated with “humanities computing,” like computational linguistics, to those who can rightfully claim (or be claimed, as is also often the case) they've always been doing digital humanities, like new media. Implicitly, this paper is concerned with all five of these categories, but it's also a call for digital humanists to adopt a central focus, a core practice, if you will, of “humanistic scholarship critical of its own digital-ness.” That is, a never losing sight of the inherent ideological qualities of the digital technologies we use, the uncritical application of which can not only misshape our published arguments and their visual

forms, but our scholarly values and practices as well, and of which, more importantly, can and do have a radical effect outside of the academy.

In my experience with faculty and graduate students at Northwestern University, this definitional multiplicity is how they predominantly understand, refer to, accept and wish to participate in digital humanities (despite its discursive dominance, the meta-discussions and boundary-setting tend to be way down on the list of concerns), and it's the definition that allows for the most diverse interdisciplinary discussions. Similarly, as Fred Gibbs notes in his article [“Critical Discourse in the Digital Humanities.”](#) from the inaugural issue of the Journal of Digital Humanities, “these different areas of critical focus provide opportunity for more critical theory in the digital humanities that grows out of its own work and also from further afield,” and not simply limited to English and History, but including Performance, Cultural, Ethnic, and Media Studies; Anthropology, Rhetoric, Science and Technologies Studies; and, of course, faculty and staff from the library and IT. In addition, these interdisciplinary interventions have fostered a strong and essential focus on digital skepticism that enhances conversations, strengthens scholarship, empowers classrooms, and reaffirms humanist values.

As Helle Porsdam has attempted to answer her question of [“Too much ‘digital’, too little ‘humanities’?”](#) we’ve seen a “(discursive) shift from humanities computing to DH.” Porsdam sees the former as “a technologically anchored and tool-based approach,” and the latter as “a cultural or media studies oriented approach.” Indeed, the increase in interdisciplinary meeting spaces around a more loosely-defined “DH” has furthered discussions and scholarship that while often starting from the solutionist tool-first approach are quickly complicated and rerouted to foreground scholarly questions and problems. Starting from skepticism, this approach not only shifts the focus away from “what can or should I do with this tool?” but also emphasizes a deeper questioning of digital tools and culture, further opening up new avenues of inquiry that more often than not dialectically inform and reaffirm core disciplinary practices. What’s more, these boundary crossings lead to historically-informed new formations as we’ve seen, for example, in the work of Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort in [platform studies](#); Wendy Chun’s [Programmed Visions](#) and other work in software studies; and the [#transformDH collective](#), including the work of Anna Everett, Amanda Phillips, Alexis Lothian, and Anne Cong-Huyen.

Again, while our discussion in DH so often begin with tools (a workshop on this, a tutorial on that, what can X do for you?), through the embrace of definitional multiplicity and interdisciplinary meeting spaces, we can move beyond consumptive confrontations with digital tools and toward essential self-criticism and broader critiques of digital technology and culture. On my campus, these kinds of encounters and interventions are happening at meetings of the [Northwestern University Digital Humanities Lab](#) and, also, more and more, informally, formally and across disciplines daily. Many of us seem to understand that we need to confront this together.

Confronting Technology

What, in the digital humanities, are we confronting when we confront “technology,” this thing that Leo Marx has described as [“a hazardous concept,”](#) and whose digital instantiations still seem to too easily perplex, hypnotize and mislead? At the 2013 Critical Ethnic Studies Association conference, as part of a panel titled [“Representing Race: Silence in the Digital Humanities.”](#) [Anne Cong-Huyen stated](#), “These digital and electronic technologies are of particular importance because they are often perceived as being neutral, without any intrinsic ethics of their own, when they are the result of material inequalities that play out along racial, gendered, national, and hemispheric lines. Not only are these technologies the result of such inequity, but they also reproduce and reinscribe that inequity through their very proliferation and use, which is dependent upon the perpetuation of global networks of economic and social disparity and exploitation.”

So, we’re dealing with technologies that are inherently incapable of neutrality, and the problem becomes one of graspable, actionable confrontation, in understanding just what, when we confront technology, we are confronting.

First, we’re confronting an artifact, for despite the rhetoric around “the digital” and “the cloud,” our tools are not ephemeral, but material cultural artifacts. (Indeed, speaking of materiality, the information technology industry now emits more CO₂ than the airline industry.) John Lutz, Associate Professor of History at University of Victoria, following Langdon Winner, suggests humanists approach digital artifacts the way they approach texts. In 1999, on his Slog (a slow blog), [he wrote](#), “Like other texts, artifacts are constructed with particular purposes in mind, have values ... and ... politics embedded in them. The purposes and values and politics embedded in technology are subject to

critical analyses and deconstruction like other texts.” Lutz continues, imploring humanists to engage, writing, “The humanities are the only institutional location in our society where texts are critically analyzed and if we are not critically engaging technology, nobody is. It follows from this that the more technology seems to dominate our society the more important the role for the humanities. This is one location to affirm a clear agenda for the humanities.”

Despite the urgency in Lutz’s statement, it seems clear, nearly 15 years later, we’ve maybe not paid attention, nor done, enough. As software engineer [Ellen Ullman recently stated](#) in a New York Times article discussing the builders of digital tools, “There is not a lot of internal searching among engineers ... They are not encouraged to say, ‘What does that mean for society?’ That job is left for others. And the law and social norms trail in dealing with the pace of technical changes right now.”

Another thing we confront when we confront digital technology is history. In the introduction to [Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture](#), Lisa Gitelman posits that media “are historical at several different levels, from themselves being “denizens of the past” to being “functionally integral of a sense of pastness.” Yet, as Gitelman further points out, “the success of all media depends at some level on inattention or ‘blindness’ to the media technologies themselves (and all of their supporting protocols) in favor of attention to the phenomena, ‘the content,’ that they represent.” Drawing from and building upon media archaeology, cultural studies, and Lutz’s textual approach, Gitelman uses two test cases—the phonograph and early iterations of the Web—in order to reveal what’s hidden, what we end up accepting, shaping, and perpetuating, and the same approach seems appropriate in relation to digital tools in the humanities.

By way of a quick example, this past summer, Northwestern University Library’s Center for Scholarly Communication & Digital Curation hired its first Digital Humanities Graduate Student Fellow, [Jade Werner](#), a sixth year PhD candidate in English. As Werner found out when researching and using [Juxta](#), software created and supported by NINES (Nineteenthcentury Scholarship Online), for the collation of digital texts, this methodology is my no means new, and neither is the technology that makes it possible in a more automated fashion. Drawing from the work in this area by Wesley Raabe and Sarah Werner, she writes of Juxta that it “does not replace so much as it augments scholarly editing and collation.” She then references the Hinman Collator, [pictured here](#),

a mechanical collator designed in the 1940s which “was an optomechanical device for comparing pairs of documents for differences in the text.” The point is, that despite the messianic rhetoric that often surrounds technology, and especially that of the digital variety, many so-called digital methods and tools are not new, but are artifacts that like texts demand historicization (and further contextualization) to truly, critically understand.

So, when we confront technology we are confronting socioculturally-created artifacts that have a history. But what else should we be looking out for? If a set of guidelines is what we need, it's possible Neil Postman, in his book [*Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*](#), may have provided us a place to start. [slide] When confronting technology, he says we should ask six questions:

1. What is the problem to which this technology is the solution?
2. Whose problem is it?
3. Which people and what institutions might be most seriously harmed by a technological solution?
4. What new problems might be created because we have solved this problem?
5. What sort of people and institutions might acquire special economic and political power because of technological change?
6. What changes in language are being enforced by new technologies, and what is being gained and lost by such changes?

With respect to the tool building that happens in the digital humanities, Postman's rubric for confronting technology presents a rigorous way forward for self-criticism (including confronting DH's own structures of power and control), for navigating our place in the broader social milieu, and for adhering to any values we, as humanists, wish to uphold. As [Natalia Cecire wrote in a 2011 blog post](#), after being confronted with the popular ideology of “more hack, less yack” within DH, “I think it's time we insisted a little more strongly on theorizing all that hacking.”

My contention here is that critical thinking around digital tools in the humanities (and beyond) can and should lead to cultural criticism, and, going forward, this talk attempts to explore and outline some modest but concrete ways for putting such an approach into practice.

Digital Tools

It seems daily we're inundated with new startups, initiatives, grants, centers, freelancers, and others launching new digital tools, many of which can serve scholarly and pedagogical purposes. This rampant tool production, within the humanist community alone, has led to the rise of multiple repositories for browsing, identifying and getting started with digital research tools.

In the humanities, the standard-bearer of tool repositories is [Bamboo DiRT](#). Originally started as a wiki by Lisa Spiro, DiRT (which stands for Digital Research Tools) has since been expanded and enhanced through funding from the Mellon Foundation as part of the now-defunct Project Bamboo. DiRT continues to grow under the leadership of Quinn Dombrowski and others at the University of California Berkeley, and also a steering and curatorial board that includes technologists, librarians, and scholars from a variety of disciplines. (Full disclosure: I was a Bamboo DiRT board member up until recently; and if you don't like its web design, that's mostly my fault too.) Simply put, Bamboo DiRT is a "collection registry of digital research tools for scholarly use." Bamboo DiRT is also a collaborative enterprise: anyone can sign up and add new tool listings, and, coming soon, the repository will also feature user-submitted tool reviews. Bamboo DiRT does not specialize around any particular methodology or discipline, but seeks to collect and curate as many tools as possible for digital humanities work. Of course, this can also be a drawback, as, at a glance, it currently houses somewhere around 800 tool listings. However, the DiRT team has done a remarkable job organizing the repository through robust metadata collection and various cataloging techniques, from subject categories to user-generated tags. Indeed, nearly every piece of metadata associated with a specific tool is searchable. While the curatorial, browser-side benefit to users of DiRT is clear, what I'd like to argue is that it is the backend, contributor-generated features of DiRT, through the powerful rubric and work of metadata, that is of even more benefit to digital librarians and humanists. Indeed, it's here that Bamboo DiRT shows its strength and, like Postman's 6 questions, can serve as a useful hermeneutics to help scholars and students critically engage digital tools and explore their greater contexts.

User Experience designer Harry Brignull has posited something he calls "[Dark Patterns.](#)" In his words, a dark pattern "is a user interface carefully crafted to trick users into doing things they might not otherwise do ... They're carefully crafted with a solid

understanding of human psychology, and they do not have the user's interests in mind." Here, Brignull is mostly thinking of popular applications like Facebook, Gmail, or Twitter; tools run by massive, data-mining and ad-driven corporations whose best interests involve obscuring its more obtrusive features and the manipulation of online social behavior. And while "dark patterns" might not so nefariously apply to tools in digital humanities, designers of websites and graphic user interfaces do often elide—consciously or not—many characteristics of a tool that would be important for users to understand, which even in in-depth explorations, rarely includes considerations of cultural bias, embedded ideology, issues of power and privacy, and the ability for the user to adapt and inform it. So, how do we get at these things? One answer, I believe, is through the hermeneutics of metadata.

Simply put, metadata is data about data, and in its descriptive sense, seeks to get at the "aboutness" of, for our purposes, a text or artifact—who created it? when? how? etc. As Art Historian [Murtha Baca has written](#), metadata allows our digital artifacts to be located, accessed, and in some way understood by users. Metadata is essential to the organization of information, and as the work of radical cataloger [Sanford Berman has shown](#), it also has the power to prompt deep discussions around culture, promote progressive change, and, like our technologies, embed and perpetuate cultural biases. In other contexts, especially online, the power of metadata can be expansive and increasingly invasive, as we've seen through the rise of mega-corporations like Google, Facebook, Amazon and others, and their central role in the surveillance state. As Alan Liu has stated, "the appropriate, unique contribution that the digital humanities can make to cultural criticism at the present time is to use the tools, paradigms, and concepts of digital technologies to help rethink the idea of instrumentality. The goal ... is to think 'critically about metadata' (and everything else related to digital technologies) in a way that 'scales into thinking critically about the power, finance, and other governance protocols of the world.'"

This is precisely why, I think, walking through the metadata fields of Bamboo DiRT can aid a user in beginning to confront digital tools. When one signs up as to contribute to the DiRT repository, for each digital tool one adds, there are a number of metadata fields to consider in order to provide users with a sense of its aboutness. There are, of course, obvious and essentially required fields to fill in, such as Name, Description and URL. There are also second-level fields such as Status (is the tool active, under

development, beta, or no longer supported?), Platform, and Cost. And there are fields, as we'll see below, that open up spaces for deeper critical work around digital tools, such as Developer, License, and Documentation.

The point is, that working through these metadata fields provide users, from novice to expert, a rubric, a set of productive prompts, of what to consider when attempting to understand digital technology in the humanities. These fields also force the user to slow down one's engagement with the tool, something that, in the digital now, we're so very rarely encouraged to do.

As Lisa Gitelman has written, it's imperative we consider "the whole social context, ... not to diminish the role of human agents but only to describe more thoroughly where more of them stand in order to resist, as much as possible, the disavowal of underlying economic structures or cultural politics." While the deep, critical work Gitelman elucidates in her examples of the phonograph and the web goes well beyond the scope of this talk, I'd like to provide a few introductory examples of just what kinds of questions can emerge, what types of critical spaces can open up, when we begin to poke and prod through the pathways afforded by metadata as we explore the social, cultural and ideological contexts of digital tools in the humanities.

For instance, one of the most important metadata fields in DiRT to consider is "Developer." While there is much to consider here—was the tool developed by a single person or a team? a center or a company? for-profit or not? etc.—for our purposes, it's worth looking deeper into, for instance, the cultures the developer might be embedded in so as to see just what that tool might represent and possible perpetuate in its application. Take this tale of two tools, [Omeka](#) and [Mukurtu](#), both platforms for curating digital collections of various remediated and born-digital artifacts. Omeka was developed and is supported by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, an organization that is very much at the forefront of promoting and producing tools that support a particular conception of openness associated with the open access movement in scholarly publishing. This embrace is embodied in many of its projects, from PressForward to Zotero. Indeed, Omeka, as its project page states, is "a Swahili word meaning to display or lay out wares; to speak out; to spread out; to unpack." And Omeka promotes and perpetuates this conception of openness through its out-of-the box features, namely its privacy settings, which through a binary approach (open or closed),

privileges and encourages a uniquely Western notion of “openness,” one that results in all digital artifacts being shared in the same public manner for any and all to access. In comparison, the developers of Mukurtu took a significantly different approach. On the platform’s website, its creators write, “Mukurtu is a grassroots project aiming to empower communities to manage, share and exchange their digital heritage in culturally relevant and ethically-minded ways.” Conceived by [Kim Christen](#), Associate Professor and Associate Director of the Digital Culture and Technology program in the Department of English and Director of Digital Projects at the Plateau Center for American Indian Studies at Washington State University, Mukurtu, [like Christen’s scholarship](#), complicates the Western conception of openness and thoughtfully expands notions of collecting, preserving, and sharing digital cultural artifacts by not prescribing how the tool can be used, but through empowering the implementation of community-specific protocols. Mukurtu, “is a Warumungu word meaning ‘dilly bag,’ Like the dilly bag, Mukurtu CMS is meant to be ‘a safe keeping place’ for cultural knowledge and a catalyst for ongoing dialogue about sharing, making and reproducing cultural materials and knowledge.” Through this approach, databases of cultural content and objects can be developed and displayed that treat openness and privacy in a much more nuanced way, allowing more flexibility for different cultures to define and control how artifacts are stored and disseminated, while also prompting critical discussions around digital tool use and its effects.

A second important metadata field to consider when confronting a digital tool is “License.” Was the source code for this tool released under an open source license? If so, what are the varieties of open source licenses, and how does that affect users or those who might wish to interrogate further or build upon? If the code is proprietary, what needs to be further investigated? While not all proprietary source code covers up “dark patterns” and other kinds of nefarious means and ends, we still do not fully understand, for instance, how Google’s proprietary algorithms mediate our online activities. And though “open source” has become commonly accepted as antithetical to the evil of proprietary, is that always the case, is the history of “open source” really so distinctly positive? As scholars such as [David Golumbia](#) and [Nathaniel Tkacz](#) have argued, open source ideologies have also been intimately linked to the rise of extreme cyberlibertarian and market-based ideologies. By thinking through how and why a digital tool’s source code was created and is shared, one can dig deeper into everything from its broader

sociocultural history to its continuing impact, influence, and whether or not it leaves room for users to negotiate and influence its less prescriptive attributes.

Finally, a third field to consider is “Technical documentation.” It seems obviously important but it also leads to the advice that so few want to ever hear or heed: read the documentation. If you want to know what a tool does and how it does it, your best bet is to read the documentation first. Especially in the humanities, this documentation can actually be far from dry or strictly limited to the technical specifics of the tool itself. [slide] For instance, [WordHoard](#), a platform for analyzing a corpus of deeply tagged texts, includes a brilliant history and introduction to corpus linguistics, which gives one further insight into a rich disciplinary history. Another example is the currently in production [Version Variation Visualization](#); it provides not just a great introduction to issues of algorithmic collation and analysis of translated texts, but engages in self-criticism through in-depth discussions on its tool’s limitations and needed enhancements, and is being developed through discussions between linguists and engineers. What’s more, in the credits, along with the usual developers and other credits in acknowledgements, David Berry, one of the first to discuss [critical digital humanities](#), is listed on the project as “Instigator.” And, lastly, there’s the corpus linguistics tool [AntConc](#), a tool that’s been around since the late 90s, and its creator and developer Laurence Anthony has actively promoted broader issues of accessibility of the software, its documentation and tutorials having been translated into several languages. All that said, there are some crucial aspects the metadata for tool listings in Bamboo DiRT do not prompt one to consider. One example is best practices—both technical and practical. For scholarly software, what methodological and disciplinary practices should be considered with its use? And exportability; that is, if you are planning to do significant work within a specific platform, can you get your data out? And, if so, will any export be in formats that will be easily readable and reusable? And last, but certainly not least, we should always ask of our tools: are there any privacy concerns with use of this digital technology? For example, this is increasingly important as students are asked to sign up for and use web-based digital tools for their assignments. As John Jones, Assistant Professor of Professional Writing and Editing at West Virginia University, [recently posted](#) on the Digital Media and Learning blog DMLcentral, “as instructors concerned with digital media and its uses in the classroom, we cannot ignore the position that we put students in when we encourage them to use digital media.” So, what kinds of data about

its users does a tool collect and share and to what ends? Can it be customized to allow for public anonymity?

Moving past the screen, beyond usefulness, the goal of this curatorial praxis is to use metadata as a critical exploratory guide, for grasping what seems ungraspable, revealing what's obscured, and for opening up spaces of essential inquiry. Keeping all of these factors in mind when investigating specific digital technologies is by no means easy, and that's to say nothing of applying this critical curation technique. This is a praxis that privileges slow, methodical curation and critique, something that itself exists in a position of privilege, especially in relation to, for example, humanities graduate students facing structural realities that do not allow for the time and support necessary to put this into practice. In my work as a digital scholarship librarian, I do keep this all in mind, but finding the time to implement such thorough curation for every tool I encounter is definitely not feasible. However, what helps is the interdisciplinary discussions, collaborations and relationships I have with faculty and students around digital tools and technology, as multiple kinds of cultural, economic, sociopolitical, technical and scholarly experiences and expertise are needed to go beyond creating mere lists and repositories of existing digital artifacts, and to perform critical acts of curation that take into consideration the multiplicities of human acts, meanings, and ideologies that we embed into our digital tools. That said, such a praxis, when combined with interdisciplinary interventions in the digital humanities, can deepen our confrontations with technology, our skepticism of and engagements with digital tools, and enable us to proceed with the ever essential work of cultural criticism.

In Conclusion

This praxis is nothing radical or new, but it does, I think, reveal and challenge a dominant rhetoric and tendency within digital librarianship and digital humanities that is too closely aligned with the [neoliberal ideology](#) and aspirations of Silicon Valley that privileges already privileged notions of hacking, building, breaking, failing, etc. Take for instance the still-popular DH Manifesto 2.0, whose very first page posits an “instruction manual” for digital humanists: “1. don't whine; 2. comment, engage, retort, spread the word; 3. throw an idea; 4. join up; 5. move on.” And the recent, highly retweeted refrain from HASTAC 2013 of “be a maker, not a hater,” or the constant app

lust from sites like ProfHacker and beyond. Combined, these guidelines, sentiments, and trends are not terribly dissimilar from Silicon Valley startup culture, and they can too easily lead to an embrace of the calculated messaging from tech corporations that market antihumanism under the guise of a revolutionary technology-led renewal of humanist practice—in effect, we become complicit in our own cooptation.

Of course, no doubt there is usefulness in experimentation and building, to sharing apps and productivity tips, yet when uncritically applied and promoted, and further inflamed with revolutionary rhetoric, there's a perpetuation and exacerbation of an anti-historical, uncritical, amnesiac practice that does not, because it cannot, deal with issues of race, gender, and class; which leads us, like Alan Liu, asking “where is the cultural criticism in digital humanities?” or like Tara McPherson, asking [“why are the digital humanities so white?”](#)

To return to the Californian Ideology, it is precisely this multiplicity that is lacking in Silicon Valley, its dominant ideology one of speed, [efficiency](#) and cleanliness. It promotes a very privileged, neoliberal conception of openness that rarely takes into account the experiences of those outside the hegemonic wealthy, white Venture Capitalist class that supports it. It is this ideology that has imbued our tech discourse with grandiose and completely unsupported claims about the democratizing power of the internet and digital tools; and that ideology has, instead of creating a worldwide networked utopia, reified into massive techno-corporate regimes of centralized power. And while this ideology might have found its voice in Silicon Valley, its power and influence is expansive. Last year [Google spent more money on lobbying in Washington than defense contractor Lockheed Martin](#), and initiatives from everything like [Bitgov](#), which seeks to literally whittle democracy down to nothing more than online voting (and completely neglecting the digital divide), to [2045](#), an international group of scientists, technologists, entrepreneurs and others seeking to “transcend” humanity through our evolution into hologram-like avatars, receive massive levels of funding, promotional support and praise.

I am certainly not advocating that all digital humanists need to take on the Californian Ideologies and/or what Michael Sacasas has called [“the Borg Complex.”](#) but what I am advocating for is a more central role in DH for this skeptical digital work, both embedded in and existing outside of the digital projects and tools we use and build; and for an increased awareness that our work exists in relation to and tension with a

hegemonic culture and ideology that is openly hostile to the values of humanism. In his 1997 essay [“Cyberlibertarian Myths and the Prospect for Community.”](#) Langdon Winner wrote, “The pressing challenge now is ... Offering a vision of an electronic future that specifies humane, democratic alternatives to the peculiar obsessions of the cyberlibertarian position.” And in relation to digital humanities, this kind of work most certainly has been and is happening, and it’s up to us to further support, promote, critique, apply and build from it. From work already mentioned such as Mukurtu and the #transformDH collective, to work so often and unfortunately overlooked in DH’s literature, like those found through the [Ethnos Project Resources Database](#), or in Kathi Inman Berens’ DH 2013 talk [“Judy Malloy’s Seat at the \(Database\) Table: A Feminist Reception History.”](#)

For us, digital librarians and humanists, this means looking critically not just at Silicon Valley, but at the academy, our libraries, and the digital humanities itself. If treating digital tools as artifacts, as texts, is a way toward a critical digital praxis, then we need to begin there, looking at the tools and texts we have used or developed or might be planning to use and develop. We would do well to keep in mind Postman’s six questions and to utilize the provocative power of metadata in our confrontations and critiques of technology and the digital humanities. And, as a final provocation amidst a digital ideology that privileges speed and efficiency above all else, I’d like to call for the digital humanities to simply slow down. That is, we do not always need to be building, hacking, failing, and experimenting in order to be doing the critical work of digital humanities scholarship. As [Wendy Chun so brilliantly put it](#) in an interview for the latest issue of eMedia Studies, “The humanities should not try to use technology to save itself, but through its own special practices, such as critical thinking. ... It’s more important for humanists to learn about the fundamental ways that technology operates. I’m interested in unpacking what is seemingly ‘transparent,’ by revealing how opaque it actually is.”