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Human beings, humanists and tinkerer in digital spaces

Abstract

The term Digital Humanities seems almost an oxymoron: can we calculate what is human? It would seem - as John Searle would put it - that on the one hand there is what is computable and belongs to pure syntax and on the other hand what is human: meaning. Relying in particular on Karen Barad's theories, I will show that in actually the question is badly posed. It is not human beings who create digital spaces, it is rather the latter who create the former: instead of showing how human beings build tools, it is necessary to study how tools build human beings. More precisely, meaning does not emerge from human thinking, but from a specific material arrangement, which is also composed of technical elements. This is what the concept of editorialization shows, as it tries to account for the emergence and structuring of digital spaces and the meaning they produce.

The question that remains open is to know what can be our role as humanists in these digital spaces. For if the digital world is a producer of meaning, the omnipresence of a handful of large companies - the "GAFAMs" - runs the risk of condemning us to a single way of thinking. As a solution, I propose not to focus on the rhetoric of operation and performance, but to dwell on the mistakes, the slowness, the complications. Because this is the only way to develop a true digital literacy. That's what the Digital Humanities should be: people who like to tweak, disassemble, break down, tinker. Tinkering has probably always been the main quality of humanists - and a digital humanist is basically a tinkerer.