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Digital Humanities, Conspiracy, and the Age of AI: An Interview with Matthew N. Hannah

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, Matthew N. Hannah reflects on the development of the digital humanities and on the place of humanistic inquiry in a rapidly changing information environment. Moving between his own formation as a literary scholar, his research on online conspiracy movements, and his work building digital scholarship spaces within university libraries, he considers how platforms, conspiracy narratives, and generative artificial intelligence are reshaping the ways knowledge is produced, circulated, and trusted. The conversation also addresses questions of access, multilingual scholarship, and international collaboration, and closes with reflections on teaching difficult subjects and on the responsibilities of preserving endangered knowledge. Throughout the interview, Hannah argues for computational methods as an extension of, rather than a replacement for, humanistic modes of thinking, and for interdisciplinary community as the foundation of the field's future.

KEYWORDS

Digital Humanities

Conspiracy Theories

Information Literacy

Artificial Intelligence

This interview was conducted in English.



About Matthew N. Hannah: Matthew N. Hannah is Associate Professor of Rhetoric, Politics, and Culture in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and inaugural director of the Digital Scholarship Hub at UW–Madison's Memorial Library. He holds a PhD in English from the University of Oregon and has built digital humanities programs at several universities, including Purdue University. His research examines extremist beliefs and conspiracy movements online, platform capitalism, and digital scholarship. He is the co-editor of *The Spectacle of Online Life* and *Conspiracy Theories and Extremism in New Times*, and his forthcoming monograph is *QAnon: Capitalism and the Crisis of Meaning*. His articles have appeared in *First Monday*, *Social Media + Society*, *Journal of Information Literacy*, and *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, among others.

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Formation and the Field

Imane Derrazi: You trained as a literary scholar and wrote a dissertation in English. How did you find your way into computational work, and what has that training meant for your collaborations with colleagues in more technical fields?

Matthew Hannah: I first began to hear about an emerging field called "digital humanities" (DH) during my coursework for my doctoral program. I was attending a seminar on "American Modernism," and we were looking at digitized magazines from online archives such as the Modernist Journals Project (https://modjourn.org/), and something clicked in my thinking. I was fascinated by these ephemeral materials and began to explore the special collections at the University of Oregon, looking for little magazines and other ephemeral texts. Just as I was starting to become interested in the elements of digitization, I began to hear about DH from a fellow student who was doing computational text analysis with Gertrude Stein.

At the time, I was not especially good with computers, but I remember thinking how rare it is in the humanities to witness an emerging avant-garde methodology, which has always attracted me, and I remember debating if I should attempt to move into the DH space. After proposing a few ideas for a dissertation project to my committee, I received overwhelmingly positive feedback on the potentially digital project, so I made the leap to DH and never looked back.

Immediately, the project ran into challenges. I wanted to perform a network analysis on these ephemeral magazines from the early 1900s, charting the connections between modernist writers, artists, hostesses, as well as fellow travelers in the avant-garde scene such as wealthy patrons, labor leaders, political radicals, and fans. My idea was to use network analysis to tell a story about modernism as a *collective* effort rather than as the literary product of a few geniuses. But I had no idea how to visualize those connections. It's one thing to describe networks of patronage or influence, but it is another challenge to visualize those data, especially as a humanist with no training in computational methods. And the dissertation also had to be researched and written within two years. Looking back now, it was madness.

I didn't know what digital tools I could use, and DH was a new enough field that there weren't as many great resources as there are now, so I started talking to graduate students in other disciplines, such as sociology, who used network analysis to try to understand how to do it. And I learned about software and about how to structure data in certain ways. About that time, I found a few other graduate students who were also interested in DH, and we formed a small interdisciplinary research group who would meet in the library to explore methods and attempt to understand the field. One of the librarians was developing workshops and courses on DH, and we created a small community of weird students working with computers.

And I found it absolutely invigorating to be working on a project in ways that nobody else in my program fully understood. It felt good to be discovering new territory in a field as established as literary studies. Collecting data and transforming it into network visualizations was such an unusual thing to be doing in an English Department that I was very much an oddball, but my mentors and fellow students were so fantastic, and I had a lot of support to take a big chance on the project. My dissertation chair, Dr. Paul Peppis, knew it would be a big challenge, but he was supportive and encouraging because the field was evolving. Without his support, I would never have been able to complete the project.

In terms of technological fields such as computer science or data science, I have found that it is not about seeing things they don't see but rather about finding ways to communicate how the methodologies in humanities or social science research are unique. Computational methods can help us answer questions in humanities and social science research, but they are only

another tool in our toolkit, alongside various theories or approaches. Computation can extend some of those methods but cannot replace them. In my experience, my colleagues in more technical fields are fantastic partners when they understand and respect the unique and nuanced methods in the humanities and social sciences. When there is a shared language for the research we want to do, there can be an incredibly fruitful area for future research.

ID: Digital humanities has been announced as the next big thing, denounced as a corporate intrusion into the humanities, and pronounced dead, all within roughly fifteen years. Which of those verdicts has aged best?
MH: The amazing thing about DH is that it is too weird to be easily defined or characterized. Digital humanists and their detractors have been debating the existence and objectives of the field since the beginning. It seems strange now, but the famous literary critic Stanley Fish used to write an opinion column for the *New York Times* denouncing DH during its heady early days. It just seems so strange now, in the age of AI, to argue about whether computational methods have a place in the humanities. There was an old joke that we used to share back in the mid-2010s: In fifteen years, there won't be "digital humanities"; there will just be "humanities." But fifteen years later, we can see that this didn't really happen either. And now, with the rise of generative AI, we are having many of the same debates about the role of technology in the humanities and social sciences. Ted Underwood, for example, has been doing some incredible work with AI language models, which he doesn't really call DH anymore but which comes out of the same lineage.

In my view, the need for training and community around how we think about the humanities and social sciences *vis-à-vis* technological development is incredibly relevant now even when we don't necessarily call it DH. We have a wide range of interdisciplinary research areas now, such as computational social science or digital history, which combine computational methods with specific methods from humanities and social sciences, and I think that this is an exciting testament to the longevity of DH. We've come a long way from having to argue about whether computational methods are destroying the humanities, and some of those debates feel quaint against the enormity of AI developments in every aspect of society. I would also add that many digital humanists are well positioned to offer pointed and reasoned critique of AI in ways that avoid doomerism or hype as our two modes of thinking.

ID: Digital humanities was often promoted as a route to employment during a collapsed academic job market. How did that play out in your own career, and what does it say about the people the field attracts?
MH: There was a lot of discussion back in the 2010s about DH helping people secure academic or "alt-academic" jobs, which I always thought was a little too instrumental and neoliberal. For me, the exciting aspects of DH were the interdisciplinary research possibilities and new horizons for research. At the same time, most of the people I knew who worked in DH went on to work in DH spaces rather than traditional academic departments in which the hiring was brutally competitive. I was completely unsuccessful in search of academic jobs teaching modernist literature, and I applied widely. I don't think I even got an interview. I applied to all kinds of literature jobs with almost no interest. But I was very successful in the DH job search, especially as more literature jobs began to include DH as a desired subfield, so my entire career was made possible because of DH.

Having said that, I think some of my success was also due to the fact that I have always been impatient with narrow thinking and narrowly scoped research questions. I am interested in a lot of different stuff, which has led me down many different paths that could have also turned into meaningful work. For example, I was very involved in the graduate student labor union (Local

#3544) during my time at the University of Oregon and almost got a job as a labor organizer. I ended up getting a postdoctoral fellowship at the same moment, and I chose to pursue that opportunity, but I would have loved to have been a labor organizer. I was also very interested in university administration, tackling graduate student leadership roles to help organize and manage the department, and I think I got my postdoc because of that experience even more than the DH.

The people I know who went on to work in DH are some of the smartest and most curious people I know. They are interested in the intersections of various disciplines and methodologies, which is what led them to DH in the first place. And the reason for this is that DH is vigorously inter- and multidisciplinary, requiring flexible thinking across domains and methods. It escapes easy categorization and crosses boundaries with joy and aplomb. Digital humanists are just interested in a lot of stuff, in my view, which provides them with a lot of flexibility in employment. I'm sure there are many digital humanists out there who are unhappy with their work, but I have found this community to be excited and engaged in this collective project despite all claims to the contrary by the field's detractors. If you want to have a good time at a conference, the DH conferences are always vibrant and exciting opportunities to hear about interesting projects.

ID: You are currently building a research center from an empty floor of a library. How do you decide what such a space actually needs?
MH: When building a new digital scholarship or DH space, the temptation can be to add a bunch of technology to the space. And I remember the various trends in academic spaces such as adding massive and expensive data visualization walls or investing in 3D printers. You want people to see your space as an exciting place for research and teaching, but every site is different with a different audience, so building a space should be done carefully and thoughtfully. The first thing I did upon arriving at both Purdue University and the University of Wisconsin–Madison was to begin having conversations with people to assess their needs. What resources are already available on campus? What is missing? What is the character of the place in which you are building a DH/DS space? These are all important questions to explore before building a new research center. Nearly a year into this job at UW–Madison, I'm just starting to understand what might be useful and what we will need for this particular community. This is not to say that building a space is ever really done. Such a project is iterative, requiring constant assessment and reassessment.

I also want to pause for a moment to clarify some terminology, because it is important for how we are thinking about the Digital Scholarship Hub that we are building. We explicitly chose to call it "digital scholarship" because we want to develop a space that crosses the "two cultures" divide articulated by C. P. Snow. My Associate Director, Dr. Anna Haensch, is a mathematician and data scientist with a faculty appointment in the Data Science Institute, and she brings deep knowledge of the computational work in those fields into our space. And because we are so committed to DH/DS work in the Hub, the Libraries offer the perfect home. Whereas DH was initially situated in literature departments, it is now expanding into many areas of research, so the Libraries offer the flexible, multidisciplinary ethos that allows us to actually do the work in an interdisciplinary way.

The other important thing to focus on when building a space is community. If you put a bunch of technology in a room and nobody uses it, what have you got? We are focusing on building our community here, and we are doing that through experimentation. We invite interesting people to give lectures, we host workshops to see what works, and we continue to reassess what we are doing. My hope is to "future-proof" this space so it will always be a vibrant,

exciting place to work even if the mission changes. And this also explains why libraries are increasingly the site for such DH/DS work. They provide a discipline-agnostic space for scholars and students from different areas of campus to meet and collaborate and research. There are very few spaces on a university campus that have the same possibility of being a true hub for research and teaching.

ID: You direct a research center as well as teach. What does a center do for undergraduate education that a course cannot?
MH: A center offers much more for the larger academic community because it provides the context for research. As a professor, I teach students for sixteen weeks and then they move on. And the course focuses on whatever the specific topic is within certain disciplinary parameters. There are plenty of ways to experiment and innovate in the classroom, especially in a vibrant discipline like Communication Arts, which is a perfect place for me because it engages so many interesting topics, but the classroom is not the same as a hub for multidisciplinary research and collaboration.

At the same time, my Dean, Dr. Erla Heyns, wanted the leadership of this Hub to be located among the faculty, and she had a vision for how this directorship would sit in the larger educational ecosystem. Having a director who also teaches and conducts research provides a unique confluence of administrative and academic work. This is very unique because my Associate Director and I can integrate our academic research and teaching into the very fabric of the Digital Scholarship Hub at a deep level.

Developing the Digital Scholarship Hub thus extends the pedagogical impact of the classroom by providing a space for engagement across academic silos and across academic ranks. We provide an environment for interdisciplinary collaborations and conversations about technology. We bring together faculty, staff, graduate students, and undergraduate students to engage important topics such as the role of surveillance, artificial intelligence, social media, platform capitalism, and other topics that we teach and research. We believe that the Hub will be a space for exploring all aspects of technology with a humanistic emphasis on community, criticality, and social conscience. The library is the perfect place to develop such a Hub because it is already the hub for this exciting and innovative focus on most campuses.

Conspiracy, Platforms, and the Information Dark Age

ID: Your work on QAnon shows the movement borrowing the surface features of scholarship: citation, cross-referencing, data visualization. Why did that particular costume fit so well, and what does its success tell us about how academic authority is recognized by people outside the academy?
MH: When QAnon first appeared on digital platforms, many journalists and commenters assumed it was a crazy movement populated by weirdos. But I didn't see it that way. As a digital humanist, I was fascinated by how digital platform infrastructure facilitated certain kinds of belief and helped establish a community in which anonymous people coalesced around a new political ideology. Of course, QAnon was the latest in a series of very strange and fascinating internet phenomena, including the Anonymous hacktivist group that was active during the 2010s, the Cicada 3301 cryptography puzzle that appeared online, and other strange social media phenomena. But for whatever reason, QAnon continued to build and recruit newcomers into a vibrant online research community. And my early work on networks of collaboration in literary circles seemed relevant to online publics who began to establish networks of internet research and political commentary.

I attended graduate school with a folklorist who studied trolling behavior, and I was struck by her empathy and compassion and willingness to understand that community when everyone else had decided that trolls were monsters. So, I tried to approach QAnon with a similar willingness to understand how such an ideology might develop and how best to respond to it. And what I discovered is that conspiracy theorists are not illiterate but are actually engaged in a kind of research with protocols and questions and methods.

QAnon developed sophisticated research methods with which to contribute to the movement, which I find fascinating. It also puts pressure on academic expertise. If I, as an authorized expert, try to dismiss conspiracy theorists, they can simply point out that I am also part of the conspiracy by gatekeeping knowledge and information. By "doing your own research," a conspiracy theorist can avoid the efforts by governments and institutions to keep the truth hidden, and that is a powerful feeling for conspiracy theorists.

ID: You named our moment an information dark age at a point when access to information had never been greater. Dark ages are usually named in hindsight. What would have to happen for you to say the lights had come back on?
MH: I'll let you know if it ever happens.

Of course, the "dark age" concept was meant to be a metaphor for how many Americans during the post-2016 elections were drawn to "darkness" as a conceit, in the belief that our historical moment was so corrupt that we needed patriots willing to "go dark" to combat it. Thus, we find ourselves in the so-called "information age" with little wisdom or compassion or knowledge. We witnessed a rather embarrassing attempt to style these "free thinkers" as the "intellectual dark web" by Bari Weiss, then an opinion columnist at the New York Times but now editor-in-chief of CBS News, where she has put her ideas into practice. We saw this energy in the creation of the University of Austin as an "anti-woke university." We also saw it in Curtis Yarvin's idea of the "dark Enlightenment" as a philosophical turn away from democracy and toward corporate and tech hegemony. And the fascination with free thinking as an outsider in the cultural darkness is still very much with us.

In general, I applaud the idea of free thinking and discourse, especially when it is difficult, but these conversations require wisdom and knowledge and commitment to other humans. What these free thinkers usually practice seems more about reviving hateful or divisive retrograde ideas at a time when many people are vulnerable to them. For example, the rise of the "manosphere" as a site for online hatred of women and girls has become a serious problem for young men in the U.S. as they navigate changing ideas about gender roles. I resonate with the idea that we are "drowning in information, while starving for wisdom," as E. O. Wilson put it. And I don't see a way out of this trap as things continue to get worse with climate disaster and economic woes continuing unabated. Humans tend to show their best and their worst in moments of crisis.

ID: You have recently argued that the vocabulary of QAnon outlived the movement itself and now surfaces in official government communication. What does a dead conspiracy theory leave behind that a living one does not?
MH: I would argue that conspiracy theories never really die. One of the incredible things about QAnon is its capaciousness and durability. It absorbed all other American conspiracy theories into itself. So, when we talk about the existence of the "deep state," which could be entirely plausible, we are already in QAnon territory. The theory has captured anti-establishment discourse so effectively that people may be espousing QAnon talking points without even knowing it. And with the continued scandal of the Jeffrey Epstein cover-up, it will likely

continue to attract new believers for years to come. Every time the Trump administration uses QAnon ideas in their official posts, online conspiracy theorists get very excited. Eventually it will finally fizzle out, but I worry about what comes next.

ID: Information literacy is the standard institutional answer to disinformation, and you have written about where it falls short. If teaching people to evaluate sources is not sufficient, what is the honest alternative? And how much can a university actually supply?
MH: One thing that always frustrates me when I give talks about conspiracy theories is that people will say we just need more information literacy. Information literacy is a wonderful discipline with an array of techniques and methods which are foundational to how we think about information, and I'm not dismissing information literacy in practice. But I am skeptical that information literacy *by itself* is effective against conspiracy theorists, and I am especially skeptical of the frameworks provided by the Association of College and Research Libraries. As I argue in the article you referenced, "Information Literacy in the Age of Internet Conspiracism," which is available online, that framework is in desperate need of an update for the post-2016 information landscape.

This seems especially necessary given that Steve Bannon, chief strategist for Donald Trump in his first administration, understood well the role of digital platforms and spaces for controlling information. His strategy was to flood the zone with disinformation to distract people. We still need information literacy very much, but we need to develop dynamic new frameworks explicitly for the post-2016, post-QAnon information environments in which we are drowning now. And ACRL does not seem to be especially interested in revising those frameworks. Their new update as of 2026 is basically to repurpose the old framework with some new language about artificial intelligence, and I felt there was still insufficient consideration of conspiracy theories, disinformation, or information warfare, which are the most salient information problems of our time.

ID: Anonymity online is usually described as a mask. Is there a case for reading it the other way, as disclosure rather than concealment?
MH: Anonymity is a complicated phenomenon. On the one hand, it provides a space for trolling and bad behavior. On the other hand, it can protect vulnerable people who want to avoid toxic online behaviors that so many people experience. I think we need to protect anonymity, which is why I oppose the notion of the "real name internet." Instead, we need to develop tools to help people think about anonymity as an identity itself. I have been working on a project that explores anonymity as a form of identity politics on the internet, a space for rethinking identity and how people perform online. And I believe anonymity is important for protecting individuals, even as it exposes what many people truly believe. When someone spews hateful nonsense from behind an anonymous avatar, they reveal something fundamental about their own character, their values and beliefs. As much as I hate to see that stuff, I believe it is important to know what people really think.

ID: Much of your evidence comes from platforms that are hostile, deceptive, and populated in part by automated accounts. How do you handle the evidentiary problem of not knowing whether your subject is a person?
MH: My approach is to consider the discourse happening online and the reception it receives. In that regard, a post by a bot could be very interesting if it gets attention. Furthermore, I have been following some of these accounts for a while, so I know what kinds of content they tend to disseminate. Having said that, a fascinating phenomenon occurred recently on X.com (formerly Twitter). They changed the platform interface so that accounts would also show

metadata indicating the location of the account owner's original IP address, and many of the more vitriolic and toxic accounts perpetuating "America First" content were not from America. More recently, Ukraine destroyed a Russian bot farm and far-right traffic on social media noticeably diminished. These are great examples of how ideologies are being cultivated by foreign adversaries of the United States as a way of sowing social discord. As a nation, America needs to develop extensive pedagogical resources and programs to help citizens navigate social media and identify these efforts to influence our ideas, beliefs, and values.

Artificial Intelligence, Labor, and the Classroom

ID: Where does the boundary fall between a task that can be handed to a machine and one that cannot, when the machine is capable of imitating both convincingly?
MH: This is a very prominent question right now, one which a DH/DS space is uniquely poised to explore. In fact, the Digital Scholarship Hub just hosted a conversation about the role of the scholar in the age of AI, so it is very top of mind for those of us in this field. On the one hand, I'm old enough to remember the hand-wringing about massive open online courses, which were supposed to mark the end of in-person learning at universities and colleges. What happened to all that hype? The COVID pandemic pushed all of us online, and we quickly learned that in-person learning is still necessary for learning. So, the rhetoric changed. On the other hand, AI is causing massive disruptions to former ways of thinking and working and being in the world.

In my teaching, I have begun exploring what knowledge means. What is uniquely human about thinking, and how can we redesign our teaching to showcase those skills? And what we are starting to see is that the flexibility and nuance of humanistic modes of thinking are surprisingly durable and attractive in an age where machines can do many tasks moderately well. If we no longer need to write essays, for example, how do we help students develop the thought processes that writing essays helped to develop? What would that look like? How can we avoid offloading all thought and creativity onto machines while also avoiding the hand-wringing that comes with each new technology?

This is not to say that there are not significant challenges facing us in the age of AI. I think there will be massive disruptions to the ways in which we live now, but I'm far more worried about the climate or political radicalization or the future of labor and capitalism than I am about AI on its own. We need to have a serious global dialogue about how we view one another and what it means to be human. I think that such a conversation is long overdue, and I hope AI gets it started.

ID: A language model can produce a fluent, confident account of a novel it has not read in any sense a reader would recognize. Describe precisely what is missing. Is the difference epistemological, phenomenological, or something else again?
MH: Something happens to us when we read. Reading is one of the rare moments in life when we are alone with a text, when we are thinking in concert with dialogue and setting and characters and events that exist only on the page and in our minds. I think that this is an amazing thing. We are transformed by reading in ways that an LLM can never be. It reminds me of when I talk to someone about a book and they ask me what it's about. How do I characterize my experience of sitting in my chair and enjoying the unique flavor of this combination of words, the associations and metaphors and beautiful and tragic moments. I'm reading Ray Bradbury's novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* right now, and I feel such a deep and bittersweet resonance with this book because of my gender and nationality and age and experience and all

the rest. And each of us has an enormous repository of such books to explore. That is a wonderful thing.

And the same is true of non-fiction books. I tell my students that working through a book of philosophy or history or theory is training our brains *how* to think. And I try to encourage them to take that seriously and not outsource that thinking to AI.

ID: Students are told that the difficulty of writing is the point, while every product marketed to them removes that difficulty. What argument has actually worked on a nineteen-year-old, in your experience?
MH: I don't think I've had much success here, but I will say that many of my students get it. I don't think they are all captured by AI. Students are curious, thoughtful, and smart. Do they always do the reading I assign? No. But they are trying. And I think that we need to continue to push the narrative that reading and writing is a workout for your brain, that we need people who can navigate nuance and shades of gray, who can puzzle through complex problems without resorting to a reductive list of bullet points. AI can do that, but we can hold a problem up and try to work through it in so many ways. And if we want to be instrumental about it, this skill will actually be marketable too. We don't need more coders. AI can code. We need more thinkers who can work through the social and cultural aspects of that code.

ID: Forecasts point to entry-level white-collar work as the sector most exposed to automation. Does that weaken the case for a humanities degree or strengthen it?
MH: I don't really know what will happen. Capitalism is entering a phase in which the only growth industry left is AI, and we don't know what will happen when that bubble bursts. Efforts to regulate AI seem doomed to failure when the international order is based on competition and resource extraction. The United States and China are currently locked in an adversarial struggle for AI supremacy, for example, which will have unforeseen downstream effects on the global political order. I also worry that we don't know what to do with labor markets that can be replaced by AI. There are many, many jobs that are part of the so-called "gig economy," which will likely disappear. What will happen to those people? How will they survive in a hostile and unaffordable world? Tech billionaires keep telling us that AI will allow us all to work less, but I think this is purely utopian and disingenuous. If these tech billionaires really wanted to help society, they would commit to our shared social contract by paying the same taxes as everyone else.

I also think the plight of higher education is tied to the travails of capitalism. We transformed higher education into a job-readiness training program, leaving very little room for what I believe should be the role of higher education: gaining knowledge and learning how to use it. Having said that, I do believe that some of the learning outcomes of a humanities education will be, and indeed, always have been, marketable. There is a reason that most industry leaders have education in the humanities and social sciences. But it is hard to make that case when an education is ridiculously expensive, and, if we want a healthy society, we need to make education free and accessible to everyone. There was a moment just after World War II when universal education was seen as a necessity for an educated populace, when education was connected to national security and prosperity. I guarantee the humanities would be more popular if we could remove the unbelievable costs of that education. It's amazing to realize that a student could have received a free education at the University of California, Berkeley until Ronald Reagan became governor of California and eliminated that opportunity. Neoliberalism has wrecked higher education in ways that continue to impact students, and making education free would also help fight misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories.

ID: Data centers consume water and power, and they are increasingly built where the political cost of building them is lowest. How should a humanist raise that question without sliding into moralizing that changes nothing?
MH: Humanists need to do research on this topic so as to communicate the challenges and engage the community on this topic. Data centers are going to be a huge problem for communities and ecologies, and we will need thought leaders and intellectuals who can engage in that conversation with facts and data rather than vibes. My Associate Director is currently engaged in research on data centers and government policy, and I am always impressed by the reasoned and thoughtful work she is doing.

Humanists certainly have a place at the table in these conversations. Environmental humanities has long been one such vibrant multidisciplinary area of research that could take up this project as well, but such engagement will require collaborations with scientists and policymakers and industry leaders. I am also increasingly interested in the narratives we tell about AI and data centers. I am currently working on a book project investigating how conspiracy theories are capturing the narrative terrain of climate discourse. And as we develop the Digital Scholarship Hub, we look forward to hosting such research and policy collaborations so we can support healthy communities and ecologies.

ID: Researchers can now train small models locally rather than renting capacity from a handful of firms. Is that a genuine alternative to platform dependence or a marginal gesture?
MH: I think a lot of people are becoming interested in what a small, locally hosted LLM can offer. I don't know if the idea will take off, but we at the Digital Scholarship Hub are very interested in it. This semester is focused on the theme of "Artificial Realities," and we are exploring all manner of artificialities. We have invited a group from San Francisco who have developed their own language model based entirely on English text from the 1930s, which raises some fascinating possibilities for historical thinking and research (as well as about the role of AI in that work) and we are hosting a workshop on building small, historical training data for developing other LLMs. This will be an exciting event for thinking about how library collections might be leveraged for interesting projects like this.

Language, Geography, and the Uneven Digital

ID: Optical character recognition and handwritten text recognition for Arabic have improved substantially in recent years. What becomes methodologically possible for North African archives that was not possible before, and what will still not be possible?
MH: I think that one of the exciting aspects of new AI tools and resources is the possibility of expanding our tools to work with languages that were, for a long time, ignored in the rush to build digital tools. We've reached a point where some of the limitations of the past are no longer as pertinent, and we can explore new possibilities. DS/DH, as a field, has long been a space where scholars have identified and diagnosed the limitations of tools for multilingual analysis, and I think the capabilities have expanded greatly. I cannot wait to see what exciting research will emerge now with the development of new tools and models for research on North African materials. It's going to be a fruitful time for research in this space.

Methods will need to be developed for working with these archives, and this will require digitization and access, both of which are not free. Projects such as HathiTrust have done some fantastic work to digitize materials from around the world, and the UW–Madison Libraries are engaged in such work. My hope is that the possibilities for working with these manuscripts will inspire researchers and libraries to begin digitizing and OCR-ing their holdings for scholars

around the world, and that large DH organizations will support such work through financial support.

ID: Multilingual digital humanities is usually defended on grounds of inclusion. Is there a stronger argument to be made, one about method rather than fairness?
MH: To me, the question is about the scholarly record and about knowledge. It is tempting to see the current infrastructure as somehow representative of human knowledge and forget that many of the digital objects and archives we can currently analyze with DS/DH are managed, curated, preserved, and digitized by institutions. Many of those institutions are educational, but some are private corporations with their own commitments and interests. We are also witnessing a potential shift in how we think of online knowledge. With the appearance of massive LLMs, online materials could easily be seen as fodder for the AI rather than as a record of human knowledge. For me, the major question is what is not currently available? What is missing from the available scholarly record? And how can we incentivize making those materials available?

ID: You have worked with Moroccan colleagues over several years. What would you warn a research laboratory here against when it begins building digital infrastructure on limited funding? Where does the money get wasted?
MH: Funding is always an issue. I think there are several things I would emphasize. One is to focus on the specific needs of the researchers and students at your particular institution. There is no point in building a DS/DH lab focused on 3D printing if everyone is working on digitizing texts and analyzing them. And this takes some time because the faculty and students may not even know what their interests will be yet. I suggest starting small. Host a few workshops, like the ones I did when I visited your lab in Tétouan. Identify which methods and tools your faculty and students want to use and work from there to develop the infrastructure to make those resources available.

ID: Partnerships between a well-funded American center and a North African laboratory can quietly become extractive, with data traveling in one direction and credit in the other. What distinguishes a reciprocal collaboration from a polite version of that arrangement?
MH: This is a good question. I think that a good collaboration should always be reciprocal and treat each partner as vital and equal. This is true in personal collaborations as well as institutional partnerships. And while we all speak of "collaboration," especially in Digital Humanities and digital scholarship spaces, the truth is that it is not necessarily a given that each partner knows *how* to collaborate effectively. We don't really have a developed set of best practices for what a healthy collaboration might look like, and each partner may have completely different expectations of what the collaboration should be.

I think this is why formal partnerships between institutions rely on the "memorandum of understanding" as a model for clarifying what each partner contributes and expects. Here at UW–Madison, we have just finalized a formal collaboration with Stellenbosch University in South Africa, and we have been very deliberate in identifying expectations, possible project partnerships, and expectations for all parties involved. Such a process feels unnecessarily formal in some cases, but I think it is an essential tool to ensure that the collaboration is healthy and productive for each party.

Teaching, Practice, and What Comes Next

ID: You teach conspiracy theories to undergraduates, some of whom will arrive already persuaded. How do you keep such a course from becoming either a debunking exercise or a cabinet of curiosities?
MH: Research on conspiracy theories has shown that debunking exercises don't really work. When I first started teaching in this space, I worried about this a lot because I didn't want the course to be about trying to debunk conspiracy theories, which doesn't really work, but I also didn't want these theories to be a source of ridicule or entertainment at the expense of the individuals who may hold these beliefs. I almost always begin my course by asking students how many of them have friends or family members who believe in conspiracy theories, and it is a useful reminder that conspiracy theorists are just people we know and care about. I also focus the course on building literacy about conspiracy beliefs and how to think about them, rather than simply showcasing them as absurdities.

Having said that, there is invariably a bit of humor and fun in exploring conspiracy theories. Some theories get very weird, especially around celebrities such as Taylor Swift, which students seem to find amusing. But some conspiracy theories are horrible and challenging, such as Great Replacement theories about migrants, so it is a real challenge to avoid traumatizing students or convincing them of conspiracy theories accidentally while also taking the subject seriously. So, I spend a lot of time looking at discourse and asking students to work through the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of conspiracy beliefs. I also require students to engage directly with primary texts, which I carefully curate, because I want them to see how these conspiracy theories develop as cultural artifacts and rhetorical objects, and I think this helps contextualize them within a broader history. One student described my course as an "inoculation" against conspiracy theories, which I loved.

ID: Data disappears when it becomes politically inconvenient. If you could guarantee the survival of one endangered body of data, what would it be, and who should be responsible for it?
MH: I would preserve climate change data, which many librarians and scientists have actually been doing. We are facing an existential crisis caused by a complete disregard for the environment, and much of the data that have been collected over the past few decades are at serious risk of disappearing due to political conspiracy theories about the climate hoax. Fortunately, there have been some incredible "data rescue" efforts led by digital humanists, librarians, and researchers to back up that data, preserving it hopefully for a future in which we take climate science as seriously as we should have long, long ago.

ID: What are you working on now that you are not yet ready to defend in print?
MH: I'm currently working on a new edited collection with a colleague, which we have titled *Paranoid Planet: Conspiracy Theories and the Environmental Humanities*, and we will be soliciting papers very soon. This volume asks how narratives about climate change, which the environmental humanities have long praised as an important component of public climate literacy, have been co-opted by online conspiracy narratives that acknowledge climate change only as the product of weather-control technologies and other fantastical tech.

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