



HAL
open science

A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN NIGERIA: PERCEPTIONS AND CURRENT ENGAGEMENTS

Tobi Akinde

► **To cite this version:**

Tobi Akinde. A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN NIGERIA: PERCEPTIONS AND CURRENT ENGAGEMENTS. [Research Report] IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series 84, IFRA-Nigeria. 2022, pp.1-10. hal-03761990

HAL Id: hal-03761990

<https://hal.science/hal-03761990v1>

Submitted on 26 Aug 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Tobi Akinde

**A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON
DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN
NIGERIA:**

PERCEPTIONS AND CURRENT ENGAGEMENTS.



IFRA-Nigeria

WORKING PAPERS SERIES

A Preliminary Report on Digital Humanities in Nigeria: Perceptions and Current Engagements.

Author

Tobi Akinde, L.L.B graduate of Law, University of Ibadan. Junior Research Associate on Digital Humanities and Documentary at Institut Française de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA-Nigeria) (2020/2021).

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5780-1616>

Email: akinde_richard@yahoo.com

Abstract

As Digital Humanities continue to attract global discussion and re-definition in terms of technological praxis and as a distinctive field of studies in the humanities, it becomes pressing to review Africa's participation and more specifically how digital humanities are being engaged in Nigeria. This study attempts to contribute to a preliminary understanding of digital humanities in Nigeria, current engagements, problems inhibiting the development of digital humanities, and prospects using qualitative methods. This study finds that there is under-engagement of DH in Africa and the current interaction with the potentials of digital technologies in the Humanities gives primacy to text through the expansion of the database of text information and computational linguistics. I conclude by proposing more local and international collaborations and expansion of the scope of engagement of digital humanities in Nigeria beyond building digital bodies of text to embrace visualizations, geospatial technologies, simulated spaces, and network analyses of complex systems.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, Nigeria, Digitization, Computational methods

Introduction

As the term Digital Humanities continues to gather acceptance and usage in different circles, so also is the increasing diversity of its understanding. The union of these two distinct fields, -the digital and the humanities- does not come without its problem of definition or interpretation. Accordingly, (Gardiner and Musto 2015, 15) suggests that:

“...Many people look at the marriage and come away with very different impressions, all from their perspectives. One can analyze the exact meanings from a different point of view, conditioned by historical and contemporary thinking and practice. Many have firm opinions on what they consider a closed case; others have yet to determine some fundamental questions surrounding them.”

The marriage of digital and humanities invites serious suspicion and questions among scholars. Like; are the digital humanities a series of practical approaches to humanistic activities or are they a specific theoretical framework nuanced within each disciplinary approach? Is it a distinct discipline with its own set of standards or rules of engagements or is there a working arrangement between traditional humanist researchers and various I.T departments? What role will capital and power play in determining the mode and type of knowledge production within the digital humanities? Or is the term together redundant since the humanities like every other field of study have embraced digital technologies?

Any attempt to answer these pertinent questions cannot be successful unless there is a recourse to the history of the incursion of the digital into the humanities. Scholars generally date the beginning of this collaboration to 1949 when Robert Busa, an Italian Jesuit, and Theologian approached Thomas J. Watson, founder of IBM, seeking help in indexing the works of Thomas Aquinas. (Busa 1980, 83-90). Over subsequent decades, the digital was used as a way of extending the toolkits of traditional scholarship and opening up archives and databases to wider audiences of users. In the late 1990s, projects that harnessed the digital to create visualizations, geospatial representations, simulated spaces, and network analyses of complex systems began to appear. Therefore, one may say that the scope of DH in theory and practice continues to evolve in response to time and discoveries.

It is clear that DH sits at the intersection between the digital and the humanities, and creates an environment for collaborative, transdisciplinary, and computationally engaged research, teaching, and publication. As such, questions that accompany the marriage of digital and traditional humanities may be seen as harbingers of renewal, signs that this is a galvanizing moment to be a humanist involved in devising, designing, and deploying new tools; in opening expanded modes of inquiry unthinkable under pre-digital conditions; and in forging innovative, multimodal approaches to traditional questions (about authorship, influence, dissemination patterns) through the as-yet-unrealized possibilities of digital platforms. (Burdick, Drucker and Lunefeld 2012, 9)

Nigeria and Digital Humanities

The history of digital humanities suggests that it thrives more in developed countries mostly located in North America, Europe, and Australia. A list¹ of digital humanities center provided by CenterNet -an international network of digital centers around the world- reveals that out of about 190 existing centers spread across the world, only two are located in Africa, one in South Africa - SADIIlar- and the other in Nigeria – Center for Digital Humanities University of Lagos². (Donnell 2011)review of global participation suggests that the economic situation of a country may determine its digital activities such that developing countries have high participation while developing and underdeveloped countries have partial or low participation. This opinion may provide one answer to the meager participation of African nations in Digital Humanities. In the same vein, (Aiyegbusi 2018) notes that the prominence of Digital Humanities in Western Societies reinforces the notion that DH is a west-driven phenomenon. This position may not be out of place if due consideration is given to economic and technological constraints, the mode of knowledge production within DH, problems of inclusion, and comprehension. Writing or researching on DH in African becomes arduous and unrewarding since African scholars participating in DH are very few in numbers and their voices are sparsely distributed across the world.

¹ <https://dhcenternet.org/centers>. Accessed July 22, 2022

² <https://www.cedhul.com.ng/> Accessed July 22, 2022

Nigeria, the most populous black country in the world, ranks as the 6th country with the highest internet users in the world, with over 123 million users.³ This is a pointer that digital literacy is not uncommon in Nigeria. In fact, since the deregulation of the telecommunication sector in 1992, the country has witnessed a tremendous surge in its digital literacy. A break of the monopoly of the telecommunication sector by Nigerian Telecommunications PLC gave rise to the proliferation of various private telecommunications and internet services providers and a consequential increase in the availability of a wide range of technological devices like computers, smartphones, digital tablets. Although it is questionable that there is a correlating increase in the population's purchasing power to acquire sophisticated gadgets. Furthermore, with the advent of different social media in the 2000s, more Nigerians, with the youths in the leading position, engage in web-based activities especially for primarily social networking amidst other purposes including academic.

Within the academia in Nigeria, Humanities researchers and scholars are embracing digital tools and platforms in facilitating their research works and teaching. A [survey](#) by (Farinola 2020) to determine the attitude of scholars and researchers in the humanities to DH technologies for research and learning, suggests that digital humanities technologies have gained wide acceptance amongst humanists. The DH tools for the survey were essentially research-aiding software. Whereas, Aiyegbusi holds the view that the use of technology in humanities research and education (i.e. the practice of the digital humanities) is almost non-existent despite the continuous increase in digital literacy in Nigeria. These divergent opinions by these scholars add to the ongoing debate within the global digital humanities communities on where to draw the line between digital literacy and digital humanities. (Jeffery 2012, 121-136) attempts to distinguish between the two phenomena. He explains that;

“The mere use of digital tools for humanistic research and communication does not qualify as Digital Humanities. Nor, as already noted, is Digital Humanities to be understood as the study of digital artifacts, new media, or contemporary culture in place of physical artifacts, old media, or historical culture.

³ <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/list-of-countries-ranked-by-the-most-internet-users.html>.

Accessed July 22, 2022

On the contrary, Digital Humanities understands its object of study as the entire human record, from prehistory to the present. This is why fields such as classics and archaeology have played just as important a role in the development of Digital Humanities as has, for example, media studies. This is also why some of the major sectors of Digital Humanities research extend outside the traditional core of the humanities to embrace quantitative methods from the social and natural sciences as well as techniques and modes of thinking from the arts.”

What Schnapp is suggesting is that using digital tools for humanistic research falls short of the requirements of Digital Humanities, it is at best digital literacy, the knowledge of which helps to facilitate humanistic researches. Elsey Oakly, a pedagogy specialist at the University of Virginia Department of Digital Humanities corroborates that;

When the activity of reflection becomes a part of the individual or the classroom interaction with the digital, we cross the boundary between digital literacy and DH. As a result, DH enhances our interactions with our course material by offering us a new method of examining the same thing. Were the conclusions you’d drawn about an author’s development over time challenged by the text-analytic results you got when you asked the same question but derived the answer computationally? How were your biases reflected in your Twitter data mining? Digital literacy gives us the capacity to employ these tools in our classrooms and research, while DH gives us the space to reflect critically about the process as well as the product derived from using such tools.⁴

In essence, there seems to exist a good number of digital literates within the humanities who employ their skills for academic researches but this practice does not in any way qualify them as digital humanists. Many scholars within the humanities are unfamiliar with the term since a cursory look at entire universities in the country will reveal that there is no school where DH is taught as a course of the study compared to universities in the western world. However, to conclude that Digital Humanities in Nigeria is almost inexistent would be misleading. Nigeria is one of the pioneers of Digital Humanities in Africa, as it

⁴<https://dh.virginia.edu/whats-difference-between-digital-humanities-and-digital-literacy>.

Accessed July 22, 2022

homes one of the two digital humanities centers in Africa and boasts of scholars whose works are helping in growing the DH discourse within Africa and provides African perspectives in global discourses.

Digital Humanities Engagements In Nigeria: Practices, Limitation, And Prospect

Adding African voice to the prevailing debates and discourses on DH, and the overall development of the field in Africa requires the active participation of Nigeria, for many reasons. Nigeria is considered in international politics as a strong force within Africa. Furthermore, Nigeria comprises of very diverse societies and each society has its unique history and culture. Due to poor documentation and modernization, many of these cultures are fast eroding thus creating lacuna waiting to be filled. Also, the digital culture in Nigeria is strong to ease the smooth engagement of digital humanities and its outputs. It is also noteworthy that within the field of digital humanities in Africa, Nigerian scholars have been making leading contributions and expanding the scope of the discourse. Scholars like [Professor Tunde Opeibi](#), Titilola Babalola Aiyegbusi, Lola Owwoeye, [James Yeku](#), [Dr. Ademide Adelusi-Adeluyi](#) are bringing African perspective into the conversation through published works and projects like [LitTech Lagos](#) -the digital depiction of Lagos city in literary writings by using natural language processing technology based on contributions from literary scholars to text mine literary works set in Lagos-, [Cartographic database: "New Maps of Old Lagos"](#) - centered on analyzing and georeferencing the maps of old Lagos by exploring the city's coastlines while using spatial analysis as a framework to narrate the historical events that connect the new look of the city to the landscape that lies beneath it-.⁵

The [Center for Digital Humanities University of Lagos \(CEDHUL\)](#) is a major leap for Nigeria academia in bringing Digital Humanities practice to the open in Nigeria. Established as the first and foremost interdisciplinary research and academic unit in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa, it has been doing a commendable job of promoting DH practices amongst existing scholars and equipping a new generation of scholars through activities such as annual summer schools,

⁵ Adeluyi-Adesusi, Ademide. "The Cartographic Database: 'New Maps of Old Lagos.'" *STS Across Borders*, May 25, 2018.

workshops, seminars, conference, collaborations, and projects. One of such projects is the Corpus of New Nigeria Media Discourse in English (CONNMDE) which aims to build a big database of different genres of English based discourses on Web-based and social media platforms emanating from Nigeria.

Despite the foregoing efforts by DH scholars, it is no doubt that the development of DH in Nigeria is being stunted by many factors. (T. B. Aiyegbusi 2018) categorizes these issues as internal and external. She describes the internal has forces as dynamics within the digital field that alienate researchers living in non-Western countries including problems of the scope of definition, inclusion, and the difference in regional educational structure and ideology. DH as an emerging field has earlier noted is devoid of a unanimous definition, keeps evolving as interests in ways to intertwine computational methods to traditional humanistic researches broadens. Since digital humanities are not in itself conceptually wholesome, it becomes unattractive to promote the knowledge amongst students in Nigeria since those expected to practice or teach still struggle with the scope of its definition.

Furthermore, transdisciplinary collaboration is strong rhetoric within the global DH discourse. However, the educational structure in Nigeria does not encourage transdisciplinary knowledge or interaction as it is relatively rigid and compartmentalized. This regional difference poses a threat to the development of DH in Africa. (Fiormonte 2014) warns that “methods that have worked effectively in one cultural setting may fail spectacularly in another (and vice versa) and certain reasoning of how things should work does not apply similarly to other frameworks.”.

Nigeria currently sits as the poverty capital of the world with over 51% of the population living in extreme poverty.⁶ It is hard to imagine that a government that is unable to provide the most necessities for its citizen and does not prioritize education in its budgetary allocation would be willing to invest in such an ‘expensive venture’ as Digital Humanities. Also, long-standing and generic problems embattling the country such as poor power supply, inconsistent or total lack of internet facilities in universities pose serious problems to the development of Digital Humanities in Nigeria. With these enumerated challenges, it is

⁶ <https://guardian.ng/news/nigerians-living-in-extreme-poverty-now-105-million/>. Accessed July 22, 2022

seemingly impossible for universities to embrace the practice and scholarship of digital humanities since it is not feasible.

Regardless of the several challenges highlighted, it is important, for the future Digital Humanities as a field of study that the practice of DH in Africa thrives, and involves the active participation of African Scholars. This is because due to the regional and geographical dynamics, Africa offers the potential for the development of new approaches and methodologies that are unprecedented in DH. Also, the need for the decolonization of DH projects and adequate representation of African voices becomes urgent in the face of many DH projects in Africa carried out in Europe. For example, Yoruba Architectural Reconstructions by Steven Nelson, African past and present (Michigan University)⁷. No doubts cultural opportunities for the field of digital humanities abound in Nigeria as the country is a makeup of diverse societies with rich and unique cultural heritage, history, literature, and language which are fast eroding due to lack of preservation, proper documentation, and modernization.

There are considerably big efforts being made at the moment to articulate the development of DH in Africa. The Network for Digital Humanities in Africa is playing an important role in bringing scholars of digital humanities across Africa together through organized international workshops and discussions. Also, International partnerships that respects the principles of decolonization, equal standing and gives appropriate credits become even more paramount since the development of DH in Africa has become a global responsibility. This is not to say there is no such collaboration in existence. For example, the CEDHUL partners with the University of Cologne, University of Edinburgh, Michigan State University, and Lethbridge University, Canada. Also, the Network for Digital Humanities in Africa receives supports from the [Lorentz Center](#), [CLARIN ERIC](#) amongst others. In 2021, Dr Ayo Adeduntan (Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan) secured a grant from the Modern Endangered Archives Program (UCLA) to digitise a selection of tapes and reels kept at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan⁸. The material kept at the IAS is invaluable for our understanding of Yoruba theatre, music and history. Similarly, in 2021, Dr Olly Owen (University of Oxford) obtained a grant from the

⁷ <https://humtech.ucla.edu/project/yoruba-architectural-reconstruction/>. Accessed July 22, 2022

⁸ <https://meap.library.ucla.edu/funded-projects-2020> Accessed, July 22, 2022

Endangered Archives Programme (British Library) to digitise the archives of the Nigerian Railway Corporation kept in Lagos⁹.

Furthermore, the recent conference in 2021 “[Digital Humanities: The Final Frontier for the Decolonisation of Knowledge?](#)” by IFRA-Nigeria in collaboration with Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan was an opportunity to present and discuss several Digital Humanities projects from different disciplines run in Nigeria. While most of the projects presented were traditional humanities projects that incorporated digital tools as a part of their methods, they did reflect on the roles DH could play in African contexts and interrogated how it can contribute to the decolonisation of knowledge. The conference also identified economic gap between Nigerian Universities and their western counterparts as the principal challenge in developing DH projects.

Conclusion

A careful review of many projects of scholars of Digital Humanities within Nigeria suggests that a lot of emphases is placed on textual database construction, text mining, computational linguistics. For example, the CEDHUL is currently engaged in projects (COMMNDE and CONPHCE) aimed at developing indigenous repositories and corpus. The current advancement in DHs globally means challenging the primacy of text. (Jeffery 2018) noted the contemporary digital humanities practices move beyond a privileging of the textual analysis (classification systems, mark-up, and text encoding) emphasizing graphical methods of knowledge of production, including moving images, sounds, and geospatial technologies. An explanation may be that some of the leading players in DH within Nigeria have a background in the fields of Languages and Linguistics for example Tunde Opeibi, Augustine Farinola, and Richard Ajah are all experts in languages. Also, the digital textual database expansion less expensive compared to visualization projects which requires heavy financial investment.

There is a need for DH scholars in Nigeria to expand their engagements of DH to incorporate methods that allow texts to be wedded into still and motion pictures, 3D designs, and geospatial technologies and this will require both local and international participation or collaboration

⁹ <http://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP1418> Accessed, July 22, 2022

References

- Gardiner, Eileen , and Ronald G. Musto. 2015. *THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES A Primer for Students and Scholars*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Burdick, Anne, Johanna Drucker, and Peter Lunefeld. 2012. *Digital Humanities* . Massachusetts : MIT Press.
- Busa, Robert. 1980. *Computers and the Humanities*. North Holland Publishing Company.
- Donnell, Daniel O. n.d.
<https://www.digitalstudies.org/articles/10.16995/dscn.54/314/#ODonnell2012>.
- Aiyegbusi, Babalola T. 2018. *Decolonizing Digital Humanities Africa in Perspective, Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and the Digital Humanities* . University of Minnesota Press,.
- Farinola, Augustine A. 2020. *Digital Humanities Scholarship in Africa: Prospects and Challenges*,. Virtual DH2020 Conference: Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO).
- Jeffery, Schnapps. 2012. *A Short Guide to Digital Humanities*. MIT Press.
- Oakly, Elsey. n.d.
- Aiyegbusi, Titilayo Babalola. 2018. "Decolonizing Digital Humanities: Africa in Perspective ." In *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and Digital Humanities* , by Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont. Minneapolis, London: Minnesota Press.
- Fiormonte, Domenico. 2014. *Digital Humanities from a Global Perspective*.
- Jeffery, Schnapps. 2018. MIT Press.