Title:

Why the statement “the digital humanities have no theory” is a liar’s paradox

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Abstract:

In philosophy, “liar’s paradoxes” are a category of self-denying statements that have been known and studied for more than two millennia. Figuratively, operating with a liar’s paradox is like pulling the rug under your own feet. The statement that the digital humanities have no theory (statement-of-no-theory) falls into this same category of paradoxes. The paradox arises from the problem that this statement-of-no-theory is in itself a theoretical statement; call it a “theoretical-statement-of-no-theory,” or more simply a “theory-of-no-theory.” The theory denies its own existence and is therefore self-denying. The same conclusions can also be reached over another path of reasoning. The statement that the digital humanities have no theory logically means that the digital humanities cannot make any theoretical statement. This leaves us with a “statement-of-no-theoretical-statement,” or simply, a “statement-of-no-statement,” which is again self-denying. The consequence of self-denial is devastating for any theory. As a consequence of self-denial, the statement-of-no-theory cannot make any predictions and must therefore remain untestable. This present article follows the statement-of-no-theory, as a liar’s paradox, from the end of the 19th century and from controversies around Vilfredo Pareto’s statistics of heavy-tailed distributions to sociology with Pierre Bourdieu, and to present-day digital humanities.

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Illustration: In 2017, Philip Ursprung questioned the idea popular among humanities scholars that there exists no theory.

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Dan C. Baciú, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Digital Tools at Delft University of Technology, Netherlands. In his research, Dr. Baciú specializes on big data, computation, and evolutionary dynamics, as applied to the study of how ideas are disseminated and received by entire collectives of people. His theory of cultural life has been most recently published in the journal BioSystems where it instantly became one of the top-ten most frequently downloaded articles <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biosystems.2020.104208>