

**Cake or Death?: A Personal Look at  
Embracing the Academic Digital Life  
Dr. Andrew D. Devenney**

Good afternoon. Before I jump into the guts of my talk, I want to start out by coming clean. You see, I have a confession to make. For the last two years here at Grand Valley State University, I have been conducting experiments on both myself and your students. These undertakings have emerged out of my growing interest in the integration of technology with academic teaching and research, also known as the digital humanities, a buzzword becoming more important not only in my burgeoning academic digital life but also throughout the Academy at large. Today I want to share a little bit about how these mad scientist endeavors have gone for me and then pick all your brains about what secret Dr. Strangelove-esque experiments you have done or would like to do in your own academic digital lives.

There are two topics I want to examine briefly as part of this colloquium before we open the proceedings up for wider discussion. First, I will explore the reasoning behind my toe-dipping into the digital humanities swimming pool and why I have come to believe that we as academics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have no choice but to do so if we wish to remain relevant while bridging the gap between our students and the content and methodologies that make up our disciplines. Second, I will discuss a few of the key experiments I have conducted over the last two years, namely 1) the increasing role of social media in my academic life; 2) my attempt at using blogging in the classroom; and 3) my recent foray into open source education with my modestly named Devenney Teaching Hub website.

-----

However, before beginning, I want to define more clearly two key terms that inform the content of this talk, namely “digital humanities” and “social media.” Although in danger of

becoming meaningless buzzwords through ill-considered usage, both terms mark out key emerging areas of knowledge and networking that have increasingly become vital baselines for understanding life in our post-future technological epoch.

Of the two, “digital humanities” is perhaps the harder to define effectively, partly because there is still considerable debate among digital humanities scholars and practitioners about what this emerging field really is. Broadly speaking, the field of digital humanities is a loosely defined, interdisciplinary effort that uses computational and digital methods to quantify, manipulate, and analyze data in the traditional evergreen arts and humanities (or in other words, where the primary artifact of scholarly engagement is a digital object). Arising in the 1990s out of “humanities computing” efforts such as the large-scale digitization of archives, the field has grown to encompass a wide variety of activities and areas of inquiry. A good breakdown of this varied activity comes from Chris Forster, an English PhD candidate at the University of Virginia, who sketched out his observational taxonomy in a blog post for HASTAC, the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory administered jointly by Duke University and the University of California Humanities Research Institute. In it, he puts forth four distinct areas that define digital humanities scholarship as he sees it: 1) Direct, Practical Uses of Computational Methods for Research (for instance, humanities computing projects like Stanford University’s Mapping the Republic of Letters project, the use of text-mining in scholarly analysis, or the development of software such as Omeka (a platform for publishing online collections and exhibitions) and Zotero (a browser-based plug-in for collecting, managing, and citing research sources); 2) Media Studies Scholars Studying “New” Media (Web 2.0 and the like); 3) The Way New Technology is Reshaping the Classroom; and 4) The Way New Technology is Reshaping

Research and the Profession.<sup>1</sup> There is much more that one could say about all this (and much more jargon like “tesserae of expert knowledge” and “wikinomic scholarship” to weed through), but that should suffice for now.<sup>2</sup>

The other term, “social media,” is somewhat easier to define. Again broadly speaking, social media are largely web-based communication technologies that enable and encourage social interaction. New digital tools, such as blogging (e.g. Blogger), microblogging (e.g. Twitter), social networking (e.g. Facebook or LinkedIn), wikis and social bookmarking (e.g. Wikipedia and Delicious), social news generation (e.g. Digg or Reddit), collaborative document management (e.g. Google Docs), and livecasting (e.g. Skype), are the most obvious examples of social media.<sup>3</sup> However, the tools themselves are not the sum total of what social media as a concept is. Instead, social media also involves the changes these tools are having on the way we think and approach knowledge in a world where humanity’s knowledge base grows exponentially larger each and every day. Thus, there is also an emphasis in social media on the creation of user-generated and socially-filtered content and the aggregation of data and information through search.<sup>4</sup>

-----

---

<sup>1</sup> Chris Forster, “I’m Chris, Where Am I Wrong?” <http://www.hastac.org/blogs/cforster/im-chris-where-am-i-wrong>.

<sup>2</sup> One can find jargon like this in the Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0, [http://www.humanitiesblast.com/manifesto/Manifesto\\_V2.pdf](http://www.humanitiesblast.com/manifesto/Manifesto_V2.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> This short list is culled from a much larger list found on the Wikipedia page for “Social Media,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_media#Examples](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media#Examples).

<sup>4</sup> This is culled largely from Brad King, “What is Social Media,” [http://www.thedudeman.net/wp-content/uploads/docs/class/j299x/jou299\\_lecture\\_1\\_whatissocialmedia.pdf](http://www.thedudeman.net/wp-content/uploads/docs/class/j299x/jou299_lecture_1_whatissocialmedia.pdf).

With definitions out of the way, it is time to turn to the first questions of the day. Why exactly have I started to become involved in all this techno jibber jabber? Isn't this all simply a mish-mash of information flows and overlapping technologies good only for adding increased complexity to my already hectic academic life? On the surface, these are fair questions. After all, I have little to no dedicated background in the digital humanities. For instance, during my childhood, exposure to new computing technologies was mainly confined to playing on my Atari 5200 and, later, my Nintendo NES; faux-coding with my Commodore 64 computer (i.e. typing in the software code of games published in computer magazines); and watching my cousin play around on bulletin board systems (BBS). During my undergraduate college years, I typed many of my papers on an electric typewriter, received my first email address in the mid-90s, and stumbled disinterestedly through my Computers and Society course with a C+. My graduate school training came in a department that, notwithstanding its innovatively collaborative joint degree program and its methodological focus on comparative and transnational history, was and is rather traditional (i.e. low tech) in its approach to history pedagogy. And during much of the last ten years, I have argued to friends and colleagues that social media tools like Facebook, MySpace, and whatnot were merely time-wasting garbage. What I am trying to say is that I have largely used computers more so for play and entertainment than for work and have resisted integrating technology into my workflow when I could. Why then have I consciously chosen to learn to use more and more emergent technologies and integrate them into my academic life?

The answer that finally dawned on me few years ago was annoyingly simple, and one can sum it up using the short question contained in the title of this talk: "Cake or Death?" The British cross-dressing comedian Eddie Izzard has a bit in one of his shows where he comments on the

difference in style between the Catholic Spanish Inquisition and a repression carried out Church-of-England-style. I would like to briefly show this to you all now; call it our video interlude.<sup>5</sup>

Humor aside, the answer to the question of “Cake or Death?” lays bare a rather fundamental reality when it comes to the omnipresence of emergent technology as we move deeper into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The issue is this: in our present epoch, new knowledge and technologies emerge and warp our society with startling speed, collapsing and shifting social meanings, cognitive processes, and social interaction along the way. The process will not stop anytime soon; in fact it will only accelerate. While this hyperreality, as the French postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard labeled it, appears rather bewildering the older one is, for our present and future student cohorts and academic colleagues, hyperreality is their reality. For some people, this might not matter much; they can simply pull back their engagement from the hyperreal Now and wrap themselves in the comforting embrace of nostalgia and the Way Things Used To Be (historians seem particularly good at this, which stems in part from our obvious and necessary fetishization of the past). However, academics that have educational and public intellectual roles (i.e. all of us) do not have this luxury, not if they want to continue to fulfill those roles effectively. There was a quote I came across a few months ago that crystallized this notion for me (and is what stimulated me to put together this talk). It comes from Kyle Munkittrick, Program Director with the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies at NYU. Writing for Discover Magazine’s “Science Not Fiction” blog on how we are all now living in the future as traditionally conceived but still incomplete and how this is causing significant social anxiety, Munkittrick wrote, “Our Baudrillardian hyper-reality is one in which world-altering

---

<sup>5</sup> The video clip is located here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFyuhTwi\\_OE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFyuhTwi_OE).

inventions must be instantly integrated into our lives or we begin to fall behind, to fall *out* of reality. If you met someone who didn't use a cell phone or computer and had no idea what the internet was, would you say that person shared your reality? Really?"<sup>6</sup>

The implications of this for the Academy seem clear to me. The fundamental question of "To Tech or Not to Tech?" has only one answer in much the same way that "Cake or Death?" has only one answer: cake, of course. This is what became clear to me a few years ago when I decided to expand my academic digital life. I could either chose to engage with the new hyperreality of my students and my new and future colleagues in the Academy or I could not and quickly find myself becoming less relevant to their experiences, less able to bridge the gap between my reality and theirs, ultimately less effective as an educator and a scholar.

-----

However, coming to this realization did not mean I had to run out immediately and obtain cybernetic implants or suddenly become a technology blogger. Instead, I eased myself into using new technology in my academic work, experimenting with those areas that seemed the most familiar or user-friendly. Therefore, I now want to discuss briefly a few of the concrete steps I have taken to expand my academic digital life. I am going to take a rough chronological approach to these as the experiences somewhat build off of each other. Also, I want to emphasize that what follows is by no means a complete exploration of the various tech ideas I have played around with previously or are considering now, nor is this some sort of definitive list that one must follow to expand one's academic digital life. It is very much an idiosyncratic selection that I hope will prove interesting at least.

---

<sup>6</sup> Kyle Munkittrick, "The First Decade of the Future is Behind Us," <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/sciencenotfiction/2010/12/31/the-first-decade-of-the-future-is-behind-us/>.

In December 2008, I decided to quit ranting about social media and joined Twitter, a microblogging service first launched in 2006 where one posts short messages of up to 140 characters max (called tweets) to your followers and anyone else monitoring the stream. I did this mostly as an exercise to ridicule social media in general, spending most of my initial time trying to craft pithy comments about nothing. As such, for my first several months on Twitter, I used it primarily as what writer Warren Ellis calls “a drainage gully for mental slurry” – a place to dump whatever silly thoughts came to me and chat with a few of my real space friends also on the service.<sup>7</sup> It was only in the early summer of 2009 that I began to understand Twitter’s greater potential, particularly when it came to my own academic life. I began to follow more consistently other historians and academics, which opened me up to the less flippant uses of digital tools like Twitter: information exchange, real-time feedback, and global networking. My use of the service since then has changed considerably. While it still serves as a mental dumping ground of sorts for me (which some New Media scholars might label “lifecasting” and a person on the street might deride as “narcissism”), it has also become a nexus for collaboration and networking in my profession; a central hub for spreading and obtaining new ideas about teaching and research; a communications tool that allows me to interact easily and quickly with my students outside the classroom; and a further avenue for personal and professional promotion (and emotional support) on the academic job market. It is quite simply an all-around good time eclectic flow of information, individuals, and ideas – dynamic, ever changing, asynchronous – that has yielded some interesting professional benefits for me and other academics I know. For instance, I am on the editorial board of a new scholarly journal launching later this year (entitled

---

<sup>7</sup> Warren Ellis, “Twitter: A Drainage Gully for Mental Slurry,” <http://www.warrenellis.com/?p=10481>.

*Transnational Subjects*, dealing with transnational cultural history in the modern era) because of my connections with the small but growing community of historians active on Twitter (called, amusingly enough, Twitterstorians). I have watched one of my graduate school colleagues, long disinterested in the networking and promotion aspects of social media and the internet generally, leverage connections made through Twitter to help finance and produce a historical documentary he recently filmed on the Cahokia Native American site near St. Louis, Missouri. Rather quickly, Twitter has become an integral part of my academic life.

-----

The second and third examples I want to discuss with you involve using technology and social media in my teaching. In the Fall 2009 semester, I experimented with blogging in two of my World History to 1500 courses. First appearing in the late 1990s, a blog (or “web log,” the phrase from which the word “blog” comes from) is a medium largely used for online journaling where an individual or small groups of individuals post and share news, information, regular commentary, reviews, pictures, or anything else really on a public website, with entries usually displayed in reverse chronological order. There are a number of free and/or open source software platforms available (e.g. Blogger, TypePad, Movable Type, WordPress, etc) to facilitate easy access to blogging and minimize much of the inherent coding difficulties in managing a blog system. That is to say, you do not need to mess around with the coding guts of the software unless you want to do so. In addition to providing a means for expressing opinions and ideas, a blog also has the capability to encourage public feedback, commentary, and criticism from those that read or stumble upon it. Thus, in the last twelve years or so, blogging has emerged as a vibrant online extension of the public sphere, albeit in ways Jürgen Habermas probably could not have foreseen. Having come across examples online of other academics integrating blogging into

their classroom pedagogy, I decided to try out my own experiment in online, discursive discussion and commentary. I did this so that 1) students could gain some experience interacting with this relatively new public space as more than merely consumers; and 2) students could gain further opportunities to work on their writing skills consistently throughout the semester.

The barebones outline of the assignment was this. Students were divided into groups of five to six and assigned with the task of collaboratively managing their own history group blogs. The blogs nominally dealt with various themes of the world history course. That is to say, on certain weeks student postings had to relate to a common, assigned theme while in other weeks they could freely post on whatever suited their fancy. Students had three main tasks: 1) naming and designing their blogs, making aesthetic choices to highlight their professionalism or individuality or creativity; 2) posting a minimum of eight blog entries per student during the eight weeks the assignment ran (entries capped at one thousand words); and 3) commenting on the postings of their fellow blog members and the blogs of their classmates.

<<<Briefly run through the various student websites>>>

Without a doubt, the experiment was what I consider an abject failure, but not because blogging is incompatible with teaching, far from it. Instead, the reasons were almost entirely because of me and certain choices and considerations I did or did not make in structuring the assignment. One problem I found was that despite my students being digitally tech savvy when it came to their gizmos and other social networking dross, their level of understanding of other aspects of the internet or internet conventions was rather limited. In other words, most if not all of my students had little to no grasp of what blogging was and how to do it. Although I had provided some primers and guidance on this as part of the assignment, it was all rather superficial because I had assumed, being so-called “digital natives,” they must all know, right?

One result of this was that many students made very little effort to go beyond the bare minimum of the assignment in terms of crafting coherent, engaging blog posts. This meant that much of their early output read like warmed over encapsulations of Wikipedia entries, not blog posts displaying critical thinking and reasoned analysis. One lesson I drew from this failed assumption on my part was that although my students have been since birth living in this new, ever-expanding hyperreality, they still needed guidance in developing the skills to navigate it effectively (ergo, I really had better figure this out too, if I was going to contribute towards teaching them these skills).

The other problem I encountered was one of scale. With two classes of thirty three students each participating in this assignment, I found myself deluged with at least sixty six blog entries per week for eight weeks to offer commentary and criticism on, this on top of other grading in these classes and my other two. Needless to say, this became rather overwhelming. In the future, I plan to limit my use of this assignment to my upper division courses where it will be possible for me to manage the grading load better.

Overall, some students did seem to enjoy the experience, letting me know both in the course evaluations and in private discussions. And some students took to the project rather well, producing interesting, engaging, and well-crafted blog posts about world history topics that interested them. However, the overwhelming response from students was “This is pointless; don’t do it again.” I have not given up on using this assignment, but I plan to refine it further before deploying it again.

-----

The final example I want to discuss involves the development of my open source education portal called the Devenney Teaching Hub. This was an idea that came to me last

summer after a year or so of hanging around online with a variety of digital humanities scholars who are pushing the envelope when it comes to the integration of technology and the Academy.

<<<Briefly run through the various components of the Teaching Hub>>>

So the questions I should probably answer at this point is: why have I done this? Why have I released all my teaching related materials to the wilds of the internet? Superficially speaking, the online influence of digital humanities scholars I follow on Twitter certainly played a role. My intense dislike of proprietary Learning Management Systems like Blackboard, with their closed, walled off interfaces and overabundance of cumbersome tools, also explains my motivation here. However, in a general sense, my new commitment to open source education stems from dissatisfaction I have with the way some in the Academy approach the question of transparency in teaching. As a scholar-educator working in a profession (higher education) that is all about the production, manipulation, and distribution of scholarly and general knowledge, it strikes me as troublingly ironic that some appear to resist embracing those very principles in the manner and techniques in which they Educate Young Minds. It is, I believe, a resistance borne out of the idea of academic freedom but in a slightly twisted manner. The culture of the Academy has a tendency to fetishize the role of the professor/instructor in the classroom as an Island unto Themselves, which can foster a further sense of closed resistance when “threatened” with external scrutiny. In this age of macro budgetary pressures, outcomes assessment, and ideologically-driven but intellectually-stunted state legislators, keeping our teaching methods and materials behind a Blackboard wall deep within the confines of the Ivory Tower seems counter-productive, helping neither our students or society or even ourselves in the long run. If one of the goals of my profession is to showcase my scholarly activity (produce and distribute knowledge, right?), then there is no reason for me not to apply this to my teaching as well.

Finally, there is also a question of branding and intellectual property in this decision. As our world becomes technologically integrated more and more, having some control over one's electronic footprint becomes even more vital. I am always struck by how information aggregation and search on the internet has transformed the ways people can and do connect with each other and how one's absence from this Google and Facebook landscape separates people from this evolving public sphere. Irrespective of what else there may be about me or other Andrew Devenneys on the internet, the first few results that come up from a Google search for my name are my websites (my personal domain and the Teaching Hub), my Twitter presence, and links to my scholarly work. These are largely avenues that I control and shape without much external interference and not hosted on any university IT resources or blocked from public view by the Blackboard gatehouse. The Teaching Hub therefore is a part of my larger brand, my teaching portfolio, and my digital identity.