

Humanities and the future notion of societal impact

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Abstract

In this article, the author relates various areas such as Higher Education, social media, educational politics, society and humanistic research in regards to comment on the challenges faced by Humanities and its future notion of societal impact. It is argued that in order to identify and understand the future impact of the Humanities, it is necessary to develop a methodologically and theoretically based mapping design in which the complexity of the development can be understood and explored. The article draws upon the PhD thesis *Ad nye veje* (Mønsted 2015) in which a specific study programme in Higher Education in Denmark is explored as an educational example of both the development and future of Humanities and its notion of impact. The specific study programme in question is a humanities-based Higher Educational programme called Humanistic Informatics at Aalborg University. The collective purpose of the article is therefore to look upon the recent development within this specific Higher Educational programme as an important and unique type of humanistic societal impact.

Keywords Humanities, Higher Education, educational development, social media, societal impact

Humanities current challenges – an introduction

Over the years, Humanities and its impact have (if not always) been both governed and challenged by an (un)spoken requirement for the identification of its impact (Collini 2012; Mønsted 2015; Pedersen, Stjernfeldt and Køppe 2015). The notion of impact in relation to Humanities seems inextricably linked to a societally grounded relevancy where humanistic knowledge is sought and challenged in community-oriented practice (Bate 2011). A challenge that, in many ways, breaks with the classic understanding of Humanities as primarily focusing on language and literature - a new Humanities is on the way (Finnemann 2001). In order to identify “the new Humanities” one must look closely to the challenges that seem to be the focal point. In the recently published book *Kampen om disciplinerne* (Pedersen, Stjernfeldt and Køppe 2015) it is argued that the Humanities - unlike social and natural science - has a greater challenge in identifying its notion of impact and thus justifying and emphasising its existence (Pedersen, Stjernfeldt and Køppe 2015, 9). The pressure on Humanities is both identified and specified as followed:

(...) today Humanities is an essential challenged research field. For many years Humanities has been a disputed area for both scientific and political struggles. Everyone from Danish Industry to the European Commission have a position on Humanities, but very few have systematically considered the content of the humanistic research field and the characteristics of this scientific approach. (...) The book describes how a new Humanities are emerging (Pedersen, Stjernfeldt and Køppe 2015, 9)

The need for identification of what Humanities both can and do is there for vital to the future of the research field. A future which seems to be linked to Humanities’ ability to cement its existence in relation to its societal relevancy. In 2011, Humanities’ societal relevancy was harshly criticised by Linda Maria Koldau, a professor at Aarhus University, as Koldau directed a sharp criticism of the humanistic Higher Educational programme in Danish universities

(Koldau 2011). According to Koldau, there is a mismatch between what the humanistic curricula claims to educate the students and what the students are actually taught. This mismatch contributes to undermining Humanities' societal impact, as the students do not acquire the necessary skills to guarantee their social relevance and thus meet the labour market's requirements and needs (Koldau 2011). Koldaus' criticism reflects a concern about Humanities' current state and future societal justification – a critique which seems to mark the beginning of a broad debate across the Danish universities in general and Humanities particular (Dahl 2013; Hedetoft 2014; Sørensen 2014). So what holds the future for the Humanities in regards to its educational content and societal relevancy?

According to Pedersen, Stjernfelt and Køppe (2015), the development and dissemination of digital media is to be looked upon as a core element in the understanding of both the challenges and development of Humanities since the 1960s:

Thus, until recently digital methods only played a small roll in large parts of Humanities, while “Humanities Computing (from 1960s), Library & Information Science Research (from 1970s) and Humanistic Information and Media studies (from 1980s) as well as other more dispersed areas, has been relatively isolated from mainstream Humanities. (Finnemann in Pedersen, Stjernfelt and Køppe, 2015, p.317)

In relation to this article, it is interesting to note that these aspects such as Humanistic Informatics were created in order to accommodate the increased pressure on the classic understanding of a Humanities without technological involvement (Mønsted 2015, 135). For example, the high unemployment among humanities graduates in the 1980s stressed the need and importance for new thinking – then and now (Sørensen 2014; Mønsted 2015, 284). By taking an interdisciplinary approach to understanding interpersonal and organizational communication and technology, makes Humanistic Informatics a historical and current highly relevant Higher Educational programme, as the development seems to revolves around such an approach.

The empirical and methodological foundation

As this article draws upon results from a PhD thesis conducted by the author (Mønsted 2015), in which the author addresses the formation and development of Humanistic Informatics and how the quality of the programme can be optimized, it is necessary to present the empirical and methodological foundation as a conceptual framework for understanding the following perspectives on Humanities societal impact.

The empirical foundation consists of a broad variety of texts: Curricula, censorship annual reports, texts regarding Danish educational policy, the technological and societal development in Denmark and, above all, nine interviews with lecturers and professors (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015) – all linked to Humanistic Informatics (Mønsted 2015, 37-51). The many empirical contributions constitute a whole – a whole where Humanistic Informatics is not seen as a separate element, but is instead understood and looked upon in a larger societal, educational and political context (Clarke 2005, 69). The purpose of collecting a broad and complex empirical data foundation is thus to create a trans-empirical understanding of the humanistic educational development (Clarke 2005).

Methodically, the empirical material thus required a broad methodological design. By extension Clarke (2005) and her methodical approach to work with 'Situational Analysis' was chosen as the methodological tool cabinet (Clarke 2005, xxxiii). With its mapping approach as the guiding analysis element, it becomes possible to embrace greater empirical data volumes while structuring them - a structure which makes it possible to analyse new patterns across the total empirical foundation. Through Clarke's mapping analysis, a narrative discourse understanding (Fairclough 1992) of the Humanities' future impact is created.

Fairclough's 'Orders of discourses' (Fairclough 1992, 237) was used as a discursive framework which allows an in-depth analysis and understanding of the content of the narrative discourse. The results of the in-depth analysis are thus looked upon as 'orders of discourses', all of which relate to the narrative discourse. In addition, Bourdieu is incorporated to provide an explanatory and perspectival sociological perspective to the understanding of the findings (Delica and Mathiesen in Fuglsang 2007, 177-203). In total, the

empirical and methodological foundation represents an overview of the collective structure of the study (Mønsted 2015).

Humanistic Informatics – a Higher Educational programme

In continuation of the above, it is natural to wonder why the focus on a specific Higher Educational programme in relation to 'Humanities and the future notion of impact'. It is therefore essential to remember that Humanities' societal impact is largely centred on and been anchored in the Higher Education programmes at universities, as the candidates facilitate and practice research-based humanistic knowledge through their occupations. It therefore means that, in general, humanistic Higher Educational programmes *are* a way to understand Humanities' societal impact. Thus, Humanistic Informatics is looked upon as both a relevant and timely educational programme for understanding the present and future Humanities.

The basic education programme (leading to a BA) Humanistic Informatics was established in 1985 at Aalborg University Centre. The programme was created as a specific response to the prevailing technology in the early 1980s¹ (Mønsted 2015, 136). The idea was that the presence of humanistic research was crucial to the technological development in order to ensure that, rather than solely focusing on the technical aspects, the technology could and should be user-oriented (Schärfe 2003, 25-34). Instead of having the general technological development as its focus, Humanistic Informatics had the *use* of technology as its primary focus. Consequently, the fusion of technical science and Humanities formed a radically different study programme within the Danish Higher Education sector, where the computer was looked upon as a medium for processing communication as information. In short – the computer as information technology (Schärfe 2003, 30).

In practice, the name of Humanistic Informatics is both a term for a basic educational programme (BA), yet also a common basis for a number of master's degrees. Fig. 1 is an illustration of the structure of the study programme in 2015:

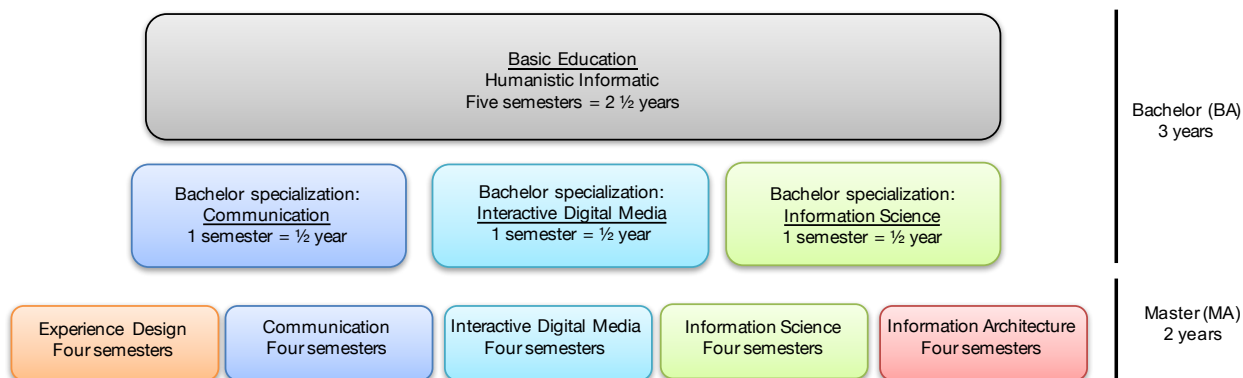


Figure 1: The structure of the study programme of Humanistic Informatica

The common denominator for both the basic education and the specialisation is the development of human and organisational communication and the opportunities and challenges that lie in the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The basic education programme is thus characterised by introducing the students to various aspects of each of the graduate degree programmes. The programme gives the students a common academic and scientific theoretical education, and after the fifth term, they will have the opportunity to specialise and immerse themselves in their favourite academic subjects in the master's degree programmes listed above (Fig. 1). Each of four basic educational programme terms have their own theme: 1st term on communication products, 2nd term on communication processes, 3rd term on communication and strategy, 4th term on communication and the individual, and finally, 5th term on communication design. The students' undergraduate specialisation therefore has a direct impact on which graduate degree programmes they have the option to choose afterwards (Humanistisk Informatik, 2013). These master's programmes are thus designed as specialisations within the common frame of Humanistic Informatics. Historically, the development of the programme has shown that changing societal and technological conditions have a direct impact on the programme as the programme appears to both accommodate and incorporate these changes into the curricula (Mønsted 2015, 121,157-167). The result of the constant adaption, however, has the negative effect that the teachers/researchers perceive the programme as fragmented and in need of consolidation

(Mønsted 2015, 284-286). A consolidation, where Humanistic Informatics is not merely seen as a scientific visionary consideration, but as an actual teaching practice (Mønsted 2015, 285).

Collectively, the structure of Humanistic Informatics is to be looked upon as a way of studying human interaction in relation to technology, media, organisations and society. The development of Humanistic Informatics shows that there is a continuous and mutual influence between the educational and societal development. However, the societal influence seems to have a much clearer impact on Humanistic Informatics than vice versa. It is therefore interesting to take a closer look at the importance of Humanities' societal impact, as it appears to be both subject to considerable internal (within the Humanities) and external (political) attention.

Why focus on 'the notion of impact'?

First and foremost, it is essential to emphasise that Danish Humanities' societal relevance and contribution should not be viewed as an internal (Humanities) but also as an external (social and political expectations) matter. To further lower the artificial importance of such a focus on Humanities' contribution in Denmark, it is interesting to include aspects of the conference on 'Innovation and Creativity in Research and Education within the Humanities' which was held at the University of Copenhagen in 2012. The purpose of the conference was, among others, "to ensure the Humanities' active involvement in the shaping of policies that can solve educational, political and societal challenges" (Mønsted 2015, .204).

At the conference the current Minister for Science, Innovation and Higher Education, Morten Østergaard (R), presented his political views on the topic of the conference, which he described as "exciting and complex" (Østergaard 2012 in Mønsted 2015, 204). The Minister presented a number of divergent perspectives on Humanities' challenges relating to innovation and globalisation, and stressed in this context that for him it was of pivotal importance to maintain a good and close cooperation between companies (public and private) and the university in order to achieve "a targeted innovation" (Østergaard 2012 in Mønsted 2015, 205). The minister thus committed a vision for Humanities, where professional working relationships appear to be the way forward for Humanities, which, according to the minister, will thus be better able to con-

tribute to “creating innovative and workable solutions”. The political, asserted the minister was thus a conception of the Humanities as, to a much greater extent than previously, adapting/merging more with the business community in order to promote Humanities’ position. For, as the minister put it: “Innovation needs a human touch” (Østergaard 2012 in Mønsted 2015, 205). Specifically, this ‘touch’ should, according to the minister be achieved through an increasing focus on innovative thinking, as the individual programmes should increasingly teach students, “so that the students are inspired to solve real problems” (Østergaard 2012 in Mønsted 2015, 205). The political contributions can be summed up as a desire for greater business involvement in the Humanities, so that the subject brings an innovative ‘human touch’. This touch can be looked upon as emphasising Humanities’ existence qua its value for business cooperation. Whether to concur with such an opinion or not is of course an individual matter, but nevertheless it is a key political contribution that have a scope of influence on the future of the Humanities. In relation to this article, it is therefore essential to focus on what the Humanities can specifically contribute (impact) in a societal matter and how this impact could be provided, as the involvement of the business is a policy-based desire and requirement (Mønsted 2015, 229).

Social media in Humanistic Informatics - a humanistic societal contribution

In many ways, the period since 2000 to 2015 has emphasised Humanistic Informatics as a relevant and timely Higher Educational programme but also highlighted its challenges (Mønsted 2015, 285). These are inextricably linked to the programme’s ability to train skilled graduates to perform (Humanities) societally relevant jobs. Regarding the programme’s “relevance and timeliness,” it is interesting to note that these are specifically associated with the technological development, as the relevancy in the 00s is, for example, linked to social media: The creation of Facebook in 2004 was, in general, the beginning of a new a new era of self-performance (Wittkower 2014). This both was and is a new era where the individual presentation of self no longer is a question of online or offline self-performance as the online and offline now represent an overall context. The significance of this development, in relation to the Hu-

manistic Informatics and Humanities in general, is to underline the importance of increasing a humanistic focus on the social media development as the humanistic perspectives, methods and theories are greatly needed in the collective understanding and development of, for example, the interpersonal user aspects in social media.

In relation to Humanistic Informatics, social media is to be looked upon as an object, in which all of the programme's research perspectives (more or less) unite (Mønsted 2015, 202). The educational integration of social media as an object in both education development and in the programme's understanding of itself, is central to the general understanding of the Humanities' present and future (Mønsted 2015, 287). It is central because the programme's humanistic approach to understanding the social media as a humanistic matter highlights that Humanities should not be considered and understood as a separate community element, but rather as an active part of the overall development of society qua the technological development and significance. The humanistic societal contribution is thus in Humanities' ability to offer research-based user-oriented knowledge.

In connection with the above, it is also central to highlight Aalborg University' corporate values for the link between research study and teaching, where its stated that the university provides research-based teaching (Aalborg University 2016). In the understanding of the relationship between research and teaching, it is interesting to bear in mind that the development of social media in relation to humanistic research cemented as well as validated Humanistic Informatics' existence as a programme, because of its integration of research focus in the curricula (Mønsted 2015, 284-286).

As a specific expression of the program's development in the 00s, it is furthermore interesting to highlight the number of accepted students as an expression of the programme's timelessness and relevance (Mønsted 2015, 208). Enrolment of bachelor's students was, in 2000 and until 2006, steadily increasing, starting with 85 students in 2000 up to 97 students in 2006. The year 2007 happens to be one of "explosive" growth with an intake of 174 students, which is almost double compared to the year before (Mønsted 2015, 208). The highest number of bachelor's enrolments was in 2012, where Humanistic Informatics took in 227 students. These 227 students totalled 2.6 times as many as in 2000, which can be described as a marked increase in relatively few years (Mønsted 2015, 208).

Whether social media is a direct cause of the increased number of students cannot be established with certainty. However, a direct parallel between the prevalence of social media in the 00s and the programme's growth can be seen as an expression of just that.

Conclusion

Humanities, as a research field, is facing a number of challenges: Educational policy has, in the last five years, taken a number of decisions, all of which point towards shorter studies, greater involvement of industry in the programmes and the general adjustments of Higher Education in order to accommodate business requirements and demands. These challenges emphasise that, among others, Humanities' future societal impact must be viewed in light of both Higher Educational programmes and in the humanistic research field. The form and content of Humanistic Informatics can thus be viewed as an important contribution to current and future humanistic societal impact, as the Higher Educational programme has a humanistic approach to and integration of interdisciplinary approaches and research material. If anything, the technological development of the last ten years has shown that an interdisciplinary humanistic research approach and understanding of technology is central to the overall technological development, whereby social media can be seen as the cementing expression thereof. Humanities and its future societal impact is not limited to the continued development of social media (far from it) – but they represent a socially relevant element in which humanistic impact and influence can be identified. This approach to Humanities' future impact thus, for example, revolves around user involvement, understanding human-mediated interaction, self-performance and the development of experience design. The technological developments will undoubtedly continue, and thus humanistic contribution to and influence on these developments must be considered of relevance.

Regarding Humanities' challenges, it is clear that the indicated humanistic impact areas are broadly defined and hence difficult to specifically identify. This is due to an overlap between the Humanities and technical science, which requires a much higher degree of complexity in understanding, one where technical science and the Humanities constitute an interdisciplinary-consolidated whole. A whole in which the users of social media are, for example, consid-

ered co-producers and co-designers. Humanities' future notion of societal impact lies (among others) in its ability to proactively develop interdisciplinary methods and research designs in order to provide humanistic research-based knowledge for societal benefits.

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Notes

- 1 In 2015 the programme changed its name to Communication and Digital Media.