

What We Learned About the Humanities from a Study of Thousands of Newspaper Articles

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How might a computational analysis of the humanities in public discourse inform future efforts in humanities education and research? This question motivates this short essay; here, we reflect on key arguments from our longer article “[The Humanities in Public: A Computational Analysis of US National and Campus Newspapers](#)” with an eye toward imagining possible use cases and applications for our findings. After summarizing our main claims, we suggest ways of reframing or revaluating advocacy for the humanities based on this research. These include delineating concrete examples of the relationship between humanistic knowledge and the public interest, shifting institutional and disciplinary priorities toward forms of labor that engage a wider variety of publics, and understanding the connections between, rather than focusing on competition among, the humanities and the sciences.

“The Humanities in Public” explores how the humanities are discussed in a corpus of over 147,000 articles published from 1998-2018 in 624 mainstream national and college campus newspapers. This is a subset of the data collected by “WhatEvery1Says: The Humanities in Public Discourse” (WE1S), a collaborative project led by PI Alan Liu, funded by the Mellon Foundation, and involving over one hundred participants.¹ In tracking this discussion, we are interested not in any one particular definition of the humanities, nor are we interested in providing our own definition of the humanities. Rather, we are interested in observing the many different and often surprising contexts in which the term “humanities” appears, contexts we might miss if we decided in advance to focus on a particular definition of the term. In examining these associations, we seek to understand how the term is used in everyday contemporary newspaper discourse and consider what these uses can tell us about wider resonances of the concept of the humanities.

When we began working on this analysis, we expected to find that articles about science or scientific research appear more frequently in both mainstream and campus newspapers than articles about the humanities or humanistic research. This is true; our corpus includes about four times as many articles about science as it does articles about the humanities. However, when we examined articles about the humanities more closely and compared them to articles about science, we were surprised to find that humanities scholarship, when it does appear in newspapers, is often communicated in different ways than the results of scientific research or more general scientific information. While newspaper articles tend to communicate scientific research directly to newspaper readers – consider common headline formulations such as “Researchers discover...”, “Scientists find...”, or “Studies show...” – they tend to embed discussions of humanities research in descriptions of classes or events such as talks by humanities scholars. In our article, we call this a “double layer of communication”: humanistic knowledge is described in these articles in the process of being conveyed to a group of people. This foregrounding of an embedded audience, such as students or attendees of a panel discussion, shows how humanities ideas and fields of study come to life through the mediation and participation of various publics.

The “event-centered” nature of communication about the humanities runs counter to the familiar discourse of crisis surrounding discussions of the humanities, a discourse which humanists tend to see as pervasive. While articles about, for example, defunding humanities departments or declining majors or the need to defend the humanities more broadly do show up in our corpus, they make up only one aspect of public discourse about the humanities as it appears in newspapers. What’s more, when we consider articles that are not exactly “about” the humanities but in which the term “humanities” appears – often in incidental ways such as in a job title or the name of an institute, school, or building – we catch glimpses of an even more expansive discursive terrain in which the concept of the humanities operates. In these articles, the term “humanities” is associated with announcements about and coverage of a wide variety of events such as festivals, public lectures, performances, summer camps, museum exhibitions, basketball games, weddings, and funerals. These relatively mundane contexts alert us to the presence of the humanities in everyday life, a presence which often goes unnoticed or is dismissed as irrelevant in discussions of the value of the humanities. By appearing in the name of a building where a poetry reading will take place, or of a foundation where those mourning someone’s death should send donations in memoriam, or of the nearby high school, the term “humanities” in these articles indexes individuals’ lived and often inchoate connections to local communities and institutions.

How might such findings inform efforts by those, often positioned within institutions of higher education, who seek to advocate for the humanities and for humanities scholars and students? First, the observations that we have made about how the humanities already resonate within public newspaper discourse could be a powerful tool in informing how humanities scholars and students communicate knowledge and research. Many faculty professionalization resources, graduate programs, and undergraduate composition courses focus on writing for public audiences, but they often do so in a way that is unmoored from a concrete understanding of how current discourse around the humanities operates at scale. Such efforts to create future public discourse might therefore be usefully augmented by attention to recent media landscapes, through studies such as ours.

For example, one thing our corpus reveals is that, in a moment when tangible takeaways about what it means to engage with the humanities are needed, they are absent from public discourse. The articles we examine provide abundant evidence of the everyday impact of humanities knowledge and scholars beyond the walls of the university, but, as we have discussed, this impact is often implied rather than directly stated. Those interested in advocating for the humanities should make clear how an engagement with the specifics of humanistic research and teaching can lead to desired goals like jobs, the inculcation of civic duty, or the development of multidisciplinary solutions to social and political problems. In other words, discourse about the humanities should establish through lines among the diffuse activities and multiple publics we explore in our article. How, specifically, does an audience member at a humanities lecture or a student completing their general education requirements shape the public good? The gaps in the current discursive landscape register a distinct opportunity for future authors to address such questions. In our corpus, a sprinkling of articles try their hand at moving from concrete experiences – like engaging with Othello, Socrates, Michelangelo, or Frederick Douglass – to taking larger actions, like “commit[ting] ... to the service of others,” “effectively solv[ing] problems,” and grappling with “the deep questions in life.”² Such articles scratch the surface of the conversations that are possible.

Second, the forms of humanistic labor and communication that appear most often in articles about the humanities – like teaching a class, speaking on a panel, or organizing an event – are those aspects typically least rewarded by academic tenure and promotion guidelines at many institutions. Direct discussions of humanistic research are uncommon in the articles we examined, although, as discussed above, humanities research is sometimes communicated indirectly in these articles. If institutions of higher education view themselves as responsive to the publics they serve, then they should both encourage and reward the kinds of impactful

connections that we see in our corpus between institutions and their local communities, as evidenced by many articles describing humanities events and classes. Digital humanists are perhaps uniquely placed to advocate for such changes, as work such as digitization efforts both engages explicitly with public access and attention to research and simultaneously calls into question a tenure structure based on the production of single-author articles and monographs rather than collaborative or public-facing work.

Third, our findings suggest connections between articles about science and articles about the humanities and, therefore, ways of reframing advocacy for the humanities as advocacy for higher education as a whole. Though much of “The Humanities in Public” focused on chronicling the distinctions and divergences between humanities discourse and science discourse, it bears emphasis that understanding points of convergence is just as, if not more, valuable. [In our 100-topic model of approximately 13,000 articles about the humanities and articles about science](#), we identified 19 topics where the top 100 articles contributing to each topic included a mix of articles about the humanities and articles about science.³ Budgets and funding are an important point of intersection between these kinds of articles. For example, both articles about the humanities and articles about science announce opportunities for research grants and funding and celebrate those who have received them (topic 34). These articles also describe and warn against budget cuts: articles that contribute to topic 53, which we labeled “Funding and Budgeting,” report on federal, state, and university funding across the humanities and sciences. Whether they are about proposed cuts to the National Endowment for the Humanities, shutting down satellites needed for climate research, shuttering long-running labs or departments, or slashes to the research budget at the National Institute of Health, these articles present a view of both the humanities and the sciences – indeed, of basic research as a whole – in a shared state of financial precarity. In a time of seemingly ever-decreasing public support for higher education, the fate of the humanities cannot be so cleanly separated from the fate of the sciences (or the social sciences). Those who wish to advocate for the humanities can strengthen their arguments by reframing the crisis in the humanities as a need to support the liberal arts and knowledge production more generally.

The energy and excitement surrounding both scientific and humanistic knowledge that many articles in our corpus convey could further galvanize such advocacy efforts. Articles contributing to a topic on college majors (12), for example, recount “the benefits of double majoring” and emphasize efforts like a “collaborative major in neuroscience and behavior” or “an interdisciplinary major designed to give students the opportunity to study medicine and science from a humanistic point of

view.”⁴ Articles associated with a topic on human life and meaning (70) weigh the existential questions – about the soul, about consciousness, and about the “wonder and fascination” of human endeavor – that arise at the bleeding edge of scientific discovery, technological development, and humanistic inquiry.⁵ Pieces contributing to topic 51, labeled “Film, Media, and Television,” discuss cinematic representations of science and describe interdisciplinary partnerships like a “Science on Screen series.”⁶ And a topic about the arts (27), in which the top 100 articles are split evenly between those about the humanities and those about science, gathers together articles portraying interdisciplinary artistic expression. These articles celebrate efforts such as a gallery exhibit that presents “a fusion of science and abstract art” and a musical performance that centers new instruments created by engineering students.⁷ These are just a small sampling of those articles describing the wide variety of programs and events related both to the humanities and to science sponsored by and happening in many colleges, universities, and communities across the country every day. Together, they show not only that many already understand the humanities and the sciences as intimately connected, but also that audiences interested in these connections already exist and could be cultivated more directly.⁸

If there is one thing our study of public discourse about the humanities has taught us, it is that those who seek to promote the value of humanistic study and teaching and to continue such activities into the future have many reasons to hope. While the view from within academia in the United States, at least, seems increasingly bleak, public discussion of and around the humanities in US newspapers is surprisingly energetic and positive. As we read articles across our corpus, several stood out to us as guiding lights, calling for an “intentional strategy” that will “make the humanities invaluable” by “join[ing] forces” across fields, embracing community engagement “as essential for the long-term health and revitalization of the humanities,” emphasizing that there is no “crisis of interest in the humanities,” and recasting our current moment as “an opportunity to redefine how the humanities are taught and learned.”⁹ On the whole, our data suggest that people value and continue to seek out encounters with humanistic knowledge and ideas. Whatever forms advocacy for the humanities and higher education takes, this is an important starting point.

Notes

¹ More information about the WhatEvery1Says project at large, including methods, findings, recommendations, and the names of our fellow collaborators can be found at <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/>. “The Humanities in Public” provides a fuller sense of how the key claims summarized here intersect with the work of the larger project. For further

discussion, see also Alan Liu, Abigail Droge, Scott Kleinman, Lindsay Thomas, Dan C. Baciú and Jeremy Douglass, “What Everyone Says: Public Perceptions of the Humanities in the Media,” *Daedalus* 151.3 (Summer 2022), forthcoming. We wish to thank all of the participants who contributed to this project over many years.

² These examples can be observed in prominent articles associated with Topic 22 of our 100-topic model of collection 33, available at http://harbor.english.ucsb.edu:10002/collections/20200515_1455_us-classification-results-top-newspapers-universitywire-hum-sci/dfr-browser/topics100/. See Joel Kirk, “Dear CMC: An Admonition Comments,” *The Student Life: Pomona College*, September 20, 2013; Nicole Felkins, “Editorial: Humanities are what makes us human,” *The Pacifican: University of the Pacific*, November 6, 2014.

³ See the dictionary for collection 33 in [our article’s supplementary data](#) (located in “data.tgz” in the “tables” directory) for a full list of these topics and for more information about them. As we discuss in our article, we identified 12 topics as those with the highest concentrations of top articles that our classifier categorized as being about the humanities, and 69 topics as those with the highest concentrations of top articles that our classifier categorized as being about science. Topics with high concentrations of top documents about the humanities or science are those in which at least 80 of the top 100 articles were categorized by our classifier as being about the humanities or about science.

⁴ Amanda Cruz, “You can have it all, and more,” *The California Aggie: University of California, Davis*, October 17, 2016; Catherine Owers, “Notre Dame announces new major,” *The Observer: University of Notre Dame*, October 02, 2014; Catherine Palmer, “New major combines multiple disciplines,” *The Johns Hopkins News-Letter: Johns Hopkins University*, January 29, 2015.

⁵ Mindy Perkins, “When robots moonwalk: The value in human experience,” *The Stanford Daily: Stanford University*, June 01, 2015.

⁶ Layla Siraj, “The Science of ‘Spinal Tap,’” *The Harvard Crimson: Harvard University*, March 12, 2013.

⁷ Morgan Mackey, “Gallery blends creativity and science,” *UCD Advocate: University of Colorado Denver*, August 27, 2014; Gray Christie, “STEM Arts concert will feature instruments made by students,” *The Dartmouth: Dartmouth College*, May 04, 2017.

⁸ See also Amy Windham, “The media uses the humanities as boundary-crossing frameworks to help the public understand science and technology,” WhatEvery1Says, accessed December 11, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-5-18.pdf>, and Abigail Droge and Helen Foley, “Student journalists see positive opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration between the sciences and the humanities,” WhatEvery1Says, accessed December 11, 2021, <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/KF-8-5.pdf>. Several of the recommendations of the WE1S team also focus on fostering interdisciplinary relationships: see <https://we1s.ucsb.edu/recommendations/key-call-to-action-recommendations/>.

⁹ Richard Scheines, “Letter to the Editor: Humanities at CMU are healthy, and will grow,” *The Tartan: Carnegie Mellon University*, December 2, 2018; Christopher Burns, “UMaine elevates humanities through community engagement,” *The Maine Campus: University of Maine*, March 31, 2014; Gary Gutting, “The Real Humanities Crisis,” *The New York Times Blogs*, November 30, 2013; Jonathan Mah, “Coping with decline in humanities majors,” *The State Press: Arizona State University*, November 7, 2013.