

Future Humanities

Francesco Tava¹ | Daan F. Oostveen² 

¹The University of the West of England,
Bristol, UK

²Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Correspondence

Daan F. Oostveen, Utrecht University,
Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Email: dfoostveen@protonmail.com

Abstract

Future Humanities highlights the rise and convergence of new and critical humanities by publishing trans- and interdisciplinary research focused on diverse subjects and methodologies. These include, but are not limited to, philosophy, cultural and historical studies, religious studies, linguistics and semiotics, literature, and the arts as they intersect with various fields of study such as digital transformation and artificial intelligence, health ethics and biomedical technologies, climate change and biodiversity, and new media and communication. Special attention is given to the public dimension of these intersections and to the role that today's intellectuals play in their creation and development.

KEYWORDS

digital humanities, engaged humanities, environmental humanities, future humanities, medical humanities, posthumanities

Sometimes, there appears to be a general feeling that the humanities are in crisis, or somehow not up with the times. Whilst explanations of the deep-seated reasons for this crisis may vary, there seems to be a general agreement upon its dreaded consequence: the progressive side-lining and ultimate demise of those disciplines that, at least since the 19th century, have been ascribed among the “humanities.” The growing focus of worldwide academia on scientific and technological disciplines has often resulted in political regulations that have dramatically limited funding for the study of the arts, humanities, and social sciences. The United Kingdom offers an interesting example of this tendency—from the 2010 rise in tuition fees to the recent decisions by several universities across the country to discontinue undergraduate programmes in areas such as philosophy and literature (see on this a recent *Editorial* on the Guardian) the path is set towards an increasing focus on practice-led, vocational subjects, which are at the antipodes with the image—true or assumed—of the “humanist” as “master of inactivity” (Callard, 2020). This tendency is particularly apparent in so-called “post-92” institutions, which typically host highly socially and ethnically diversified student cohorts. This conveys an image of the humanities as a rather outdated set of disciplines, which are not able to or interested in tackling today's pressing issues and can therefore only be tolerated as a kind of antiquarian

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decorative item in those research-focused atheneae that can afford to keep them. Consequently, humanities are increasingly seen as a matter good for the wealthy few who, because of their status, can disregard real-world issues and focus on something as interesting as it is useless.

Many scholars working in the various fields highlighted how indiscriminate cuts to the humanities would equal to cultural vandalism. As an antidote to this crisis, a return to humanist values is then proposed, which would enable the humanities to defend their legacy as valuable in their own rights. However, the crisis of the humanities can take deeper and less apparent forms. The very definition of “humanities,” which historically has always been debated given the blurred borders and inevitable overlapping of its core disciplines, has become even less clear with the emergence of new areas of investigations—from digital humanities to media and cultural studies to postcolonialism. Today’s humanities are not the same humanities that were practiced in the 19th century, and future humanities will most likely be different from those of today. Therefore, returning to classic humanistic values would only in part ward off the dangers that the humanities are and will be running. On the other hand, however, there is at least one procedural element that unites the humanities of the past and those of the present and, perhaps, the future. A scholarly focus on the “human,” which underpins the foundation of what we now call “humanities,” has always corresponded to the presence of what we may call an “inhuman” threat. As Reitter and Wellmon (2021) pointed out, in the nineteenth century, this threat was the emergence of industrialisation, new technologies, natural science, and capitalism—phenomena that, although they all stem from human enterprise, threaten to perturb human life and, in some instances, jeopardise its survival. Today, a plethora of brand new threats is emerging, which inevitably triggers the creation of new humanities. The close historical interactions between the humanities and the social and scientific terrain on which they have grown demonstrates the groundlessness of the claim that this research area is detached from reality. The humanities have always had a natural tendency to question and critically assess this reality in a way that no other discipline is capable of. Maybe this—and not their alleged outdatedness—is the reason why they are so often belittled and opposed.

In *Future Humanities* we reject both the claim whereby humanities are done for and the defensive attitude that tends to crystallise its faded and archaic configurations. On the one hand we believe that, far from being in crisis, the humanities are rather going through a paroxysm which will ultimately lead to transformation (Epstein, 2012); on the other hand, we believe that the humanities should look beyond and critically challenge their humanist legacy and seek fruitful transversal interactions with contemporary sciences and arts. The humanities have always been strong in the imagination of forms of life. Next to that, the humanities have a task to chronicle cultural legacies. As we see, there has been a strong emphasis recently on the meaning of archival work, as well as data management. This tendency is all but new. Already in late modernity, the encyclopaedist’s dream of creating an articulated and exhaustive system of thought resulted in multiple attempts to organise the notions then available and make them into freely accessible tools. New digital technologies, which allow us to collect, access, and share unprecedented amounts of data, have given new momentum to this cultural project to the extent that the very notion of information has been dramatically amplified. Data sciences (broadly conceived to include informatics, AI and machine learning technologies, but also information and data ethics (Verbeek, 2011) are a good example of a research area that has become inherently multidisciplinary, but whose core cannot be disjoined from the humanities, that is, from disciplines whose main aim has always been to enquire about the human and its cultural artefacts (ultimately just another word for data).

Both the Covid-19 pandemic and the new reality of geopolitical challenges place a strong focus on the question what the humanities are about and how its traditional tasks should be reimagined. Epistemological values and higher humanistic learning have come under threat. Furthermore, the so-called “neo-liberalisation” of the universities is making the question of the goal and purpose of the university in the 21st century ever more important. This predicament is ironic: on the one hand, if there has been any time when the value of the humanities, with its acquired skills of fundamental critical thinking, epistemological openness, historical

perspective, and hermeneutical onlook would have been more important, it would have been now. On the other hand, epistemological scepticism is higher than it has ever been, with low public trust in science, journalism, and education.

Technological, digital, and biomedical innovations are quickly transforming our societies. These transformations demand more than the mere application of practical ethics onto these issues. We are increasingly searching for compelling narratives to make sense of these developments. But next to these innovations, there are enormous environmental, medical, and political challenges as well. Some of these challenges, such as global warming or nuclear proliferation, present themselves as “hyperobjects” (Morton, 2013), which we are incapable of grasping with our inherited imagination skills as they exceed our chronological and ontological categories. This also increases the importance of the role of public intellectuals, in making sense to the public at large about our collective challenges and histories (Woodward, 2009). The task of public intellectuals, however, is also ever more opaque, the trust in their narratives is reaching all-time lows, and shared narratives have been under suspicion for a while already. This, however, should not lead us to agonise over the future, since there is plenty of space for engaged humanities (Jay, 2010) beyond the human as a centre of meaning. Instead, we are looking at affirmative imaginations of transversal humanities practises, which might open up into a realm of posthumanities (Braidotti, 2019; Hayles, 1999).

The various forms of new and critical humanities aimed at the environmental, biomedical, public, and digital challenges of our times, are currently converging *Future Humanities* aims to attest to these emergences and convergences. Far from being outdated, the humanities are crucial for emerging fields of research, not because of their emphasis on “human(e)” values, but instead for their ability and tools to look beyond and problematise them.

The environmental humanities are a fast-emerging field of interdisciplinary collaboration in the academy (Heise, 2017). Veering between pragmatic considerations to reorganise disseminated knowledge of ecology throughout institutions on the one hand (Morton, 2016), and ideological and sometimes even radical engagement with the formidable challenges of climate change and biodiversity collapse, departments and collaborative structures of environmental humanities aim to apply humanistic knowledge to gain insight into these challenges and reimagine nature (Siewers, 2015) while learning the art of living on a damaged planet (Tsing et al., 2018).

The digital humanities is perhaps the largest and most established of the new humanities and digital tools in the humanities will probably shape the future of all humanities research (see Schreibman et al., 2004). Digital humanities has a double meaning: on the one hand it can refer to the use of digital tools and big data technologies to do research on traditional humanities topics in history, literature, art history, philosophy, and so forth. On the other hand, the societal transformations as a result of digital technologies (social media, artificial intelligence, fintech) pose humanistic challenges in its own right. The former meaning prompts the question how the knowledge that is acquired by digital technologies on humanities subjects is different from traditional methods. Is humanities research something that can (and should) be automated? What is gained and what is lost? This brings us already in the domain of the latter meaning: how do technological and digital innovations impact the value and meaning of human knowledge?

The medical humanities originated from a wish in the medical community to bring in a more human dimension in medical practices. The central question was originally formulated as: how can doctors be better doctors? On the other hand, medical ethics developed as a field in which fundamental ethical questions regarding medical questions could be addressed. But the (bio-)medical humanities are developing even further (Chiapperino & Boniolo, 2014). In the post-covid world telemedicine has emerged quickly. Technological developments allow a constant monitoring of medical data, and remote doctors can potentially track medical issues from a distance just based on analysis of these data. From narrative medicine, over medical ethics, and now techno-mediated medical practices, the medical humanities show us how, just as in the Islamic Golden Age, philosophy and medicine are closely connected.

Over the past years, there is a growing interest to study the future of the humanities. Recent initiatives and projects attest to this growth. The Network of European Humanities (<https://neh21.net>) has connected research teams from throughout Europe to map the rise of the new humanities and to create a hub for knowledge of the future of the humanities. The humanities are about imagining possible pasts and possible futures. This is not limited to the study of “cultural,” that is “human” creations as opposed to the nature world. Instead, the humanities are rather a state of mind or a methodological approach, with its distinct set of tools and approaches. This toolset can and should be applied to a plethora of research fields.

The journal *Future Humanities* proposes to become a platform for all forms of innovative humanities research, which takes the epistemological, scientific, and societal challenges of our times seriously by actively outlining experimental methodologies, showcasing best practises in transdisciplinary research formats, and bridging epistemic gaps in humanities and scientific research which have often been overlooked. This all while forging new scholarly connections and nurturing future research communities (Quay et al., 1990).

Future Humanities wants to present the width and depth of these transformations. Without remaining fixed to a single approach, or the need for programmatic “solutions,” we propose rhizomatic approaches which are able to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016), and with a firm grasp on the realities at play.

ORCID

Daan F. Oostveen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7907-3864>

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How to cite this article: Tava, F. & Oostveen, D.F. (2023) *Future Humanities*. *Future Humanities*, 1, e2. <https://doi.org/10.1002/fhu2.2>