

DH New Youth Podcast 004 | Simon Mahony: As a digital humanities builder, researcher and educator

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"DH New Youth Unbounded Talks" is a youth podcast program hosted by a team of student researchers from the Institute of Digital Humanities of Renmin University of China. It focuses on digital humanities researchers and explores and showcases the new universe of digital humanities from the perspective of the younger generation.

Guests of this issue



Simon Mahony

Personal introduction: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/information-studies/people/emeritus-and-visiting/simon-mahony>

Academic research: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/information-studies/people/emeritus-and-visiting/simon-mahony/research>

- Ø Honorary Professor of Digital Humanities at University College London (UCL);
- Ø Professor of Digital Publishing and Digital Humanities Research Center, Beijing Normal University (Zhuhai);
- Ø Visiting professor of the Department of Information Management, Peking University;
- Ø Member of the Digital Humanities Curriculum Design Committee of the iSchools Alliance;
- Ø Advisory Board of the Digital Scholarship Center (DSC) at the University of Cincinnati;
- Ø Corresponding member of the Subcommittee on Education and Research (SCEaR) of the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme;

Professor Simon Mahony has played a key role in the establishment and development of the UCL Digital Humanities postgraduate programme. He has been Director of the programme since its launch in 2011, taking over in 2017 until moving to Zhuhai in 2020.

This episode hosts

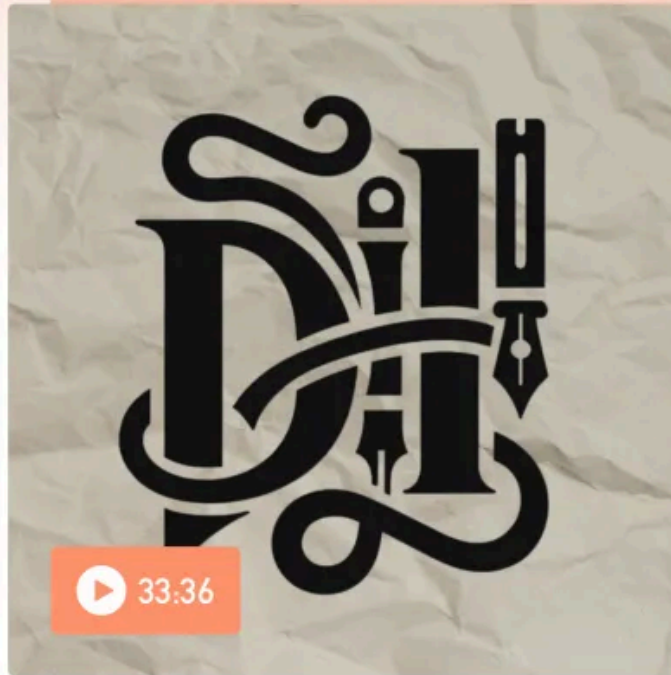


Chen Xingyi

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Host of the "DH New Youth" podcast
Editor-in-chief of "Art Hall: The 100 Most Influential Painters"

Scan the QR code to listen to the Little Universe Podcast

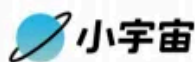


第四期 | 与Simon Mahony 畅聊数字人文

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Program Review

Interview time: November 5, 2023

Interview location: Peking University

1. Digital Humanities and Digital Scholarship, Inclusion and Cooperation

Q Xingyi: What is the difference between “digital humanities” and “digital scholarship”?

A Simon: We’ve been using the name “digital humanities” since 2004, which is quite a long time. But if I were to start a center now, I would call it digital scholarship. Like the Center for Digital Scholarship at the University of Cincinnati[1]. The essence of this question is really about **inclusivity**. **If you call something “humanities,” then people who don’t work in the “humanities” think, this (digital humanities) doesn’t apply to me.** That’s why (I prefer to call it “digital scholarship”).

I come from a humanities background, and when I taught at King’s College London (KCL), my colleagues were all classicists and medievalists. We are firmly based in the humanities. But we also work closely with engineers and computer scientists to shape our research agenda. When I was director of the UCL Centre for Digital Humanities (UCLDH), the deputy director was a computer scientist who specialized in image processing and signal processing. I had many conversations with him and other computer scientists in the field who I knew, and they said they really enjoyed working with humanists because many of the research questions in the humanities were more interesting. Engineers are usually used to working with highly structured data, but we (humanists) give them texts, literature, art, and images, giving them the opportunity to work on more interesting and difficult problems. They also like to solve difficult problems.

A phrase that often appears in my lecture notes is: **“Ask questions, not answers.”** I was trained in the classics, so I was taught to question everything. Humanists like to ask questions, and engineers like to solve problems. Humanists and engineers can work well together, we (humanists) ask questions, and they (engineers) solve problems.

When people tell you what digital humanities are, they’re actually telling you what they think digital humanities are. Digital scholarship is much more inclusive. I always mention in my talks that once you say “this is digital humanities,” you’re also telling you what it’s not. It’s like you’re creating a closed box and putting it in, which is not closed but inclusive, and that’s what I don’t want to do. I want it to be as **broad as possible, as all-encompassing as possible, as diverse and inclusive as possible.**

2. Sustainability and Responsibility

Q Xingyi: “Reshaping and Responsibility” is the theme of DH2024, which discusses resource management and collaboration in digital humanities. When I read your article about the “Shanghai Memory” project, I found that the project

website was no longer accessible. You later explained that this was a problem of post-maintenance of the website.

A

DH 2024

REINVENTION &
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Simon: Yes. I was travelling in Shanghai. I had lunch with Keven, the research project director who created the website, and explained the problem to him. I asked him who I should "complain" about this problem to? He said he would try to set up a redirect in the original website code (so that clicking on the original website link in the paper would automatically jump to the existing new website link).

- <https://scc.library.sh.cn/#/>

- <https://wkl.library.sh.cn>

("Shanghai Memory" project website)

I've had a similar problem. When I was the director of the Digital Humanities Centre at University College London, they were migrating their entire platform from the old platform to a new Drupal installation. I had to check everything and make sure everything was still there on the new platform. But they only put redirects at the top level, and I asked them to put redirects on every page. So anyone who had bookmarked that page could find the new link. For example, my personal UCL professor profile page still has the old URL, and when you click on it, it works fine and jumps to the new URL. Another problem is that the Shanghai Library (Shanghai Memory Project) put everything on one website, when before they were different websites. Now they have all these different links together, and they really need to set up redirects. This is also a **Management 101[2]** problem.

But I have to say that Chinese project websites are more likely to disappear. Because I think this (referring to solving this problem - redirection) is not a common practice. Many years ago, I told my doctoral students that if they want

to refer to a web page, they should put that web page into the Internet Archive and then cite the Internet Archive URL of the web page, because the web page may disappear after the work is completed. For example, many Chinese academic conference call for papers and online conference materials disappear very quickly.

Q Xingyi: Who should be responsible for the post-maintenance of digital humanities projects?

A Simon: This is a question about sustainability . We have been working on this problem since the birth of digital humanities. When I first started working in digital humanities, it was usually necessary to submit a grant proposal to the major funding agencies, that is, project funds. The funds would be used to develop the project and develop resources, but this also meant that once the funds were used up, it was over. So after that (the funds were used up), no project members were obliged to use their own compensation to make up for the lack of project funds and ensure that everything was going well, **unless the project members had a lot of personal love for the project and spontaneously did something to keep the project going.** Of course, in addition to the funding issue, the original developers or researchers of the project also needed to find other jobs, so **the total cost of maintaining the development and sustainability of the project would be very high.**

I used to work at King's College London , which was then called the Centre for Computing and Humanities, and is now the Department of Digital Humanities, where I was mainly involved in the development and creation of online resources. When a project is funded, the Centre provides a lifetime guarantee (funding), but in fact the so-called lifetime guarantee is only five years. Many years have passed, and many such projects are still running there, but many projects (more than five years) have also ceased to operate.

Q Xingyi: Can we say that funding is the key to a project's life cycle?

A Simon : I haven't really been involved in funding issues because I haven't been involved in organizing large projects. All the projects I have organized have been small projects. Project funding mainly comes from within the research institution. I am a teaching person, not a research person, so I need to make project proposals and introduce external funds. But the funds are limited. You need to hire students or postdocs, hire developers, etc., and pay license fees. Now you also have to pay publishing fees to publish in an open access format. But open access has another problem - you need to pay **article processing fees** [3]. Senior professors have this money, but junior staff do not.

But it wasn't until I came to work in China and talked to colleagues that I realized that they had to pay CNKI for publishing. But the articles were not available. I thought that was ridiculous. Because the university paid a subscription fee to

CNKI, it actually paid for the article, but the article was not available, and I didn't understand this model. In the West, we have been changing the publishing model to make everything public. Now we have this initiative, which is **open data** that you mentioned . Funding agencies now also want to publish this data, which makes a lot of sense because **other people can take this data and use it in their research projects, reuse it in ways that the original researchers may not have thought of.**

I used to teach database creation at KCL (King's College London) and XML coding at UCL (University College London). I always tell my students: when you design a project, you want to retrieve some things from your database, but there may be some information in the data that other people are interested in. So if you encode all these things, such as names, people and places. Maybe you are only interested in the name of the person and the date, but other people may be interested in the geographical location. So if you also tag this, then other people can use it on their own. **By opening up the data, you make the data available for others to use, which makes it more attractive and helps it face the future (research)** . Now more and more people are moving in this direction (open data), and in the West, people also think it is normal practice.



2023 Beijing Forum

3. Open Agenda, Open Education and Academic Social Networking

Q Xingyi: You mentioned that the Open Agenda covers much more than open access, including not only open access to published articles, but also educational and teaching materials, data, and various aspects of quality control systems.

A Simon : We tend to think of open access publishing as just free journal articles, or books from the likes of UCL Press, but it also includes teaching material.

Since 2011, we have developed **the Digital Humanities and Open Educational Resources (DHOER) project** at the UCL Digital Humanities Centre [4]. As I have said, I make sure that all my teaching materials are **copyright checked** and publicly available. If I give a talk at a university and they ask me to provide my slides after the talk, I make sure to remove anything that is not mine, such as photos of other people that I took from elsewhere, or publications that I did not cite. When I hand over my lecture notes to others, I check this information carefully and only leave my text, images, and any public domain content that has been cited, that is, anything with a **Creative Commons license** .

Therefore, the openness of textbooks is actually a problem. In China, open access used to be mainly for scientific papers, but now open papers are becoming more and more common, and some funders, such as national funding agencies, also hope that the research they fund can be open access in China.

Q Xingyi: If the open agenda is realized and we can access all educational materials online (because they are open), then is it still necessary to go to the university to study?

A Simon : I have a paper on this topic. In that very early paper, I mentioned that **going to college is not just about going to classes, it is about much more than listening to lectures and doing projects, it is about personal development, about your social network, social relationships, and all aspects of personal development** . Although online education and MOOCs are becoming more and more popular, this is another matter.

During my time at KCL, I was involved in the first fully remote-taught Masters course, "War in the Modern World", delivered online by the Department of War Studies. The main thing I learned from this experience was the power of online communication. A large part of the course content of the program was a discussion forum between teachers and students, but because they were in different parts of the world and most of them were also working, such as in the military and security services, the discussions were not simultaneous. Teaching online can maintain communication, but you can't get **personal interaction in the same way (in face-to-face communication)** .

I also recently wrote a paper on international and online collaboration in the digital humanities.[5] Because of the pandemic, many researchers are trying to find ways to bring people together online, but this is no substitute for real-life personal contact. One thing I always do as a PhD advisor is something I learned from my own supervisor when I was a graduate student—when I attend an offline academic event, I introduce my students to everyone. After the introductions, I walk away and let my students talk to other scholars, which of course you can't do online.

Q Xingyi: Do extroverted students have more chances of success?

A **Simon:** Yes. That's a very, very interesting question, but it shouldn't make any difference because your work and your scholarship should speak for yourself.

I think the essence of this is the relationships we've been talking about . For people who are not extroverts, they don't have the same opportunities to build direct relationships with people as extroverts do. But the reverse is also true. If someone is too extroverted, they talk too much, and that can also be a problem. In a tense situation, it can make some people talk a lot, but it can also make others stop talking.

I encourage my students to network and talk to as many people as possible. Bring your own business card to conferences and give out business cards. In the West, we don't use WeChat, but a business card with some kind of contact information. Westerners usually have and they keep other people's business cards. But in China, I have asked my Chinese colleagues for business cards and they asked me what is a business card?

People usually **remember authors by their works** . If your work is of good quality and it is open to the public and people can read it freely, it will help your academic network. **Networking is extremely important for career development because you need to meet people (communicate with them) to figure out something.**

Notes

[1] The Digital Scholarship Center of the University of Cincinnati

<https://sites.libraries.uc.edu/dsc/>

[2] Management 101: From Hiring and Firing to Imparting New Skills, an Essential Guide to Management Strategies

[3] An article processing charge (APC) is a fee that authors pay to make their paper open access (OA) immediately after publication. Once open access is achieved, it can be viewed by everyone without the need for a subscription or payment. This fee varies greatly between publishers and journals, ranging from a few hundred pounds to several thousand pounds per paper. Once the author pays the APC, the publisher uses the funds to cover various publishing operating expenses.

[4] DHOER, Open Educational Resources for the Digital Humanities.

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/digital-humanities/dhoer/aims-and-objectives>

[5] Toward implementing equality, diversity, and inclusion for virtual conferences within the LIS professions.

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