ENGAGING THE FUTURE OF THE HUMANITIES THROUGH DIGITAL HUMANITIES

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Introduction

I want to thank the authorities of Division of General Studies, Enugu State University, ESUT for inviting me to give a lead paper at this conference. I feel honoured and I appreciate this privilege. My paper seeks to engage digital humanities by looking at its future in relation to the humanities in general. Assuming one attempts to understand what the future of knowledge might entail through digital humanities discipline; What would it look like? The question becomes both disciplinary and multidisciplinary. It is disciplinary in the sense that discussing the future of humanities requires identifying the direction in which the field is moving towards— its emerging themes, possible topics of concern, and the issues likely to dominate the discipline. With the advent of Artificial Intelligence, which increasingly attempts to think and innovate for humanity, the traditional domains of thought and innovation— largely associated with the humanities are significantly challenged. In addition, polices such as STEM, which privilege practical sciences over theoretical inquiry, seem to predetermine the trajectory of the humanities. To speak of the future of the humanities is also, to a large extent, to consider the humanities for the future. The answer is also multidisciplinary because the question wants to address the diverse subjects implicated by the idea of the humanities.

This paper aims to examine the future of humanities in relation to digital humanities and, from this connection, to explore what it might mean to engage the humanities through digital methodologies. To do this, I will (i) discuss the idea of the humanities; then (ii) the humanities in relation and its relation to their historical force and contribution to human civilizations; and finally (iii)discuss digital humanities and (iv)critique the discipline through the theme of technologization of human nature implicated in the idea of digital humanities.

The Idea of the Humanities

To address this aspect of my work, Iraise and examine three questions: (1a) How may we define the humanities, and what are the goals of such study? (1b) What are the

possible sources for the study of the humanities? (1c) What are the justification for the studying the humanities? The humanities may be defined as "the accumulated record of what humankind has done with its humanness" (Janao and Althsuler, cited in Opata 1992: 1). This means that the humanities provide a critical and detailed account of what being human has meant, and of the standards and categories through which human beings have interpreted and evaluated themselves. This view arises from the fact that the criteria for being human are not always clear, and that various grounds exist on which claims to humanness are made. The simplest definition of the human being—as a rational animal—remains contentious, given the diverse standards used to assess rationality. Being human has meant different things across historical periods, and the criteria used to define human advancement have shifted accordingly. This motivates and justifies the need for the humanities.

But understanding what human beings have made of themselves must have a purpose. What then is the reason? I suggest that this purpose lies in the nature of reason itself or in humanity's traditional self-understanding as a noble creature endowed with both material and spiritual dimensions and capable of envisioning realities beyond other creatures. The human being is an active agent of creation whose presence confers immeasurable significance on the universe. This recalls Protagoras' ancient assertion that "man is the measure of all things—the things that are, that they are; and the things that are not, that they are not." Historically, the humanities have been associated with the liberal arts, a view articulated by the Italian scholar Vergerius (1404).

> We call those studies liberal which are worthy of a free man; those studies by which we attain and practice virtue and wisdom, that education which calls forth, trains, and develops those highest gifts of body and mind which enable man and which are rightly judged to rank next in dignity to virtue only. (cited in Opata 1992:6)

Opata (1992:1) argues that the humanities help cultivate human nature in a more positive, rational, and ethically humane direction. Thus, it can be upheld that the ethics of humanness is fundamental to the discipline of the humanities. Ugwuanyi (2013) defines the humanities as "the diverse fields of study that address the human condition and the knowledge arising from human nature…" While this definition extends the humanities to the social sciences and may lack precision, it nevertheless situates the humanities within the broader human sciences, where the humanities play a leading role.

The core ideals of the humanities are twofold: (a) critical thinking and (b) empathy. Ironically, these underscore the long-standing conspiracy against the belief that the humanities possess a unique epistemic capacity for criticism. Richard Rorty states that:

> Nobody really believes that philosophers or literary critics are better at critical thinking or at taking big broad views of things, than theoretical

physicists or microbiologists. So, society tends ignore both these kinds of rhetoric. It treats humanities as on a par with the arts, and thinks of both as providing pleasure rather than truth.

Since philosophy lies at the heart of the humanities, Rorty's critique broadly applies to the entire field. The implication of this is that the humanities are sometimes dismissed as disciplines pursued by those considered intellectually inferior. Those who think this way consider it easier to define and direct human nature than to direct a machine or different forms of technology. I submit that this form of over simplification of the human nature stand at the heart of what has become the problem with the idea of the humanities. Indeed, right form the secondary or middle school days of education at least in Nigeria, this attitude is evident in the arrogance exhibited by students who choose to major in medical, pharmaceutical, natural or applied sciences towards those studying the arts and humanities. Consequently, those who take to the sciences consider themselves more gifted. The assumption here is that these sciences are more challenging than the arts. I interpret this trend as part of the commodification of human nature, which I will explain in a later section. This view and attitude instrumentalizes the human nature in terms of its economic or material worth and gain and oversimplifies the complexity of the human nature which is the subject of the humanities.

The humanities can be clarified through Kwasi Wiredu's distinction between cultural universal and cultural particulars. The cultural universals as Wiredu puts it are those universal tendencies that emanate from and through the human nature. The cultural particulars are how these tendencies are expressed in a given culture and the particular form they take. The fact that human beings eat to survive is a universal human culture. But the fact that different human beings eat different forms of food depending on their location is a particular human culture.

A crucial clarification in articulating the humanities is distinguishing them from both the arts and the social sciences. This distinction is important because it helps to clarify the desirable expectation from the humanities. The arts depict and express the world, whereas the humanities analyse and interpret these expressions. For example, to engage in the art of laughter and dance or drama is not the same thing as to engage in the study of laughter and drama. The former is the domain of arts properly speaking. In the latter, a more analytical study is desired and the study applies intellectual skills to produce insights into the art of laughter and dance. Similarly, the humanities differ from the social sciences which study the social structures and nature of social formations with the aim of locating the outcome and results of social formations, while the humanities provide interpretative lenses for understanding their meaning. At the moment, there is an increasing attempt to make all knowledge to have a scientific character and if this is the case then, all knowledge should be verifiable. But the humanities defy this view. The reason is that the humanities stand in between all knowledge that are produced in relation to the humanities. Through their

interpretative role, the humanities provide insights that illustrate the limitations of the arts and the social sciences and the ways through which they could be widened to provide knowledge about what is unknown.

Having discussed this, let us address the next question(1b): What are the possible sources of the humanities? I propose that the humanities derive from at least three sources:(1) **human nature** and its manifestations, (2) the **human environment/ecology** where these manifestations take place, and (3) **the temporal dimension of human experience**. The human nature encompasses body and mind, and the mind consists of intellect, will, and imagination, each contributing to the humanities inquiry. In a recent study (Ugwuanyi 2023) shows that examining the human nature through the Igbo thought scheme yields alternative classifications— physical, spiritual, and psycho-spiritual—which offer fresh insights for the humanities. reveal different distinctions/divisions and that these are plausible sources of interpreting the human nature. The physical parts include: (Ai) *Ahu*-body (Aii) *Nkpuruobi*-heart; (Aiii) *Obara*-blood (Aiv) *Onyonyo*-shadow. The spiritual aspects (B) include – (Bi) Muo-spirit; (Bii) *Akpa Uche*-Mind; (Biii) *Chi*-Guardian angel. The psycho-spiritual parts are- (Ci) *Ndu*-life- or life-giving force; (Cii) *Muo* (Spirit) and (Ciii) *Chi*-guardian angel. If these are applied to study the humanities, it is plausible to imagine fresh insights into the humanities.

The human environment and ecology refer to**(2a) geography, (2b) the culture, and(2c) location** where human nature is manifested and made to interact with the human community. It is plausible to suggest that different portions of the world read different meanings into different aspects of human nature and the meanings grow overtime, which demands to be studied and known. These are sources of the humanities. The third dimension is time:**(3a) present, (3b) past, and (3c) future** which shapes how human experiences and meanings evolve. Each of these constitutes a possible way to locate the archaeology of knowledge that falls under what is called the humanities. If any of these is taken in isolation, it would be seen that a form of knowledge could emerge from this which could be called the humanities. For example, if 1a-the intellect; 2a-the geography and 3a-the present are taken together they could lead the enquirer to study how the intellect is functioning in a particular geography at the present, suggesting thereby that the intellect as it functions today and the forms of grasp of things today might be different from the possible forms of grasp of things tomorrow or yesterday. In other words, what a person in Enugu might be thinking today about the human being might be different from what a person at London may be thinking based on the force of times and circumstances of the time. It can also proceed further to suggest that different times produce different knowledge for the humanities. Similarly, if an effort is made to juxtapose (1b, 2b, and 3b), a new variable might emerge—that is how the will worked in the past and the culture that directed that might be different from how the will works today and culture that directs this will. This might be the same with (1c,2c, and 3c).

The next question concerns the justifications for studying the humanities. I will answer the question by citing a recent view of the humanities in <u>Maddie Neely</u>(2025) "Why We Must Study the Humanities"? The author says:

> *Without the humanities, we risk losing the ability to think critically, empathize deeply, and challenge the systems that shape our world. Studying the humanities is not just a luxury, it is a necessity that we must prioritize. At their core, the humanities teach us how to understand and interpret the human experience. They cultivate skills essential in any field: communication, analytical reasoning, and the ability to construct and deconstruct arguments. Whether you are studying engineering or geology, the humanities offer invaluable perspectives. By taking a humanities general education course, elective, or even writing for The Pacifican, you are gaining skills that are irreplaceable no matter how advanced technology becomes. In my own experience, writing for The Pacifican has sharpened my ability to express my ideas clearly and craft cohesive, persuasive arguments! Ultimately, to dismiss the humanities is to dismiss what makes us human. A society that neglects philosophy forgets how to question. A world without literature loses its ability to imagine. Without history, we repeat our worst mistakes. As J. Irwin Miller once said, "The calling of the humanities is to make us truly human in the best sense of the word.*

To address this question further. I ask; what would the human community lose in the absence of the humanities. Without the humanities, the motivation for self-reflection and the duty implied would have been lost. It will be difficult to live the ethics of the life that is consciously designed. If human beings do not have an account of their humanity through a form of knowledge that supports and advances this, chances are that their sense of dignity and worth and how to advance it would have been tragically impaired. It makes little sense for humans to seek to know nature and even God without knowing themselves adequately. This is what the humanities do for the human community. The humanities are the mirror through which humans can measure the collective stage of the growth and advancement of the human idea.

The second loss is the diminished capacity for imagination and intellectual expansion. The humanities deepen and widen human imagination and serve to direct thoughts on the possibilities of what it means to be human. The possibilities of human minds are revealed through the humanities and this makes them desirable as a faculty of human knowledge. After the effort to articulate the idea of the humanities, I proceed to engage the humanities by looking at the influence of the humanities in shaping human civilization and influencing different ways of reading humanity.

The Humanities, Its Historical Force and the Human Civilizations
The humanities have developed in diverse ways and within different frameworks. At the moment the world has witnessed different civilizations such as western

civilisation, Egyptian civilisation, Japanese Civilisation, etc. However, it is important to note that not all traditions have had a written culture and that the humanities grounded in written culture have been more influential than those that evolved through stories, narratives, or what is often referred to as orature. This disparity contributed to what Ugwuanyi (2010) describes as the "science and arts of reason," as a way of capturing the dynamic that has operated more prominently within the humanities. The "science of reason" refers to the principles that human reason is capable of grasping—the values and measures by which reasoning is evaluated as valid and precise. The "arts of reason," by contrast, denote the celebration of these achievements of reason. The claim here is that this has functioned differently in human civilizations. As a result, and influenced by what can be termed dominant ethical orientations, the humanities have emphasized different forms of truth. Consequently, human societies have evolved under varying ethos, ethics and civilizations.

Samuel Huntington, in his influential work *The Clash of Civilizations*, provides a view that elaborates this point. He holds that human civilizations are basically different, and that these differences are justifiable and legitimate because they are rooted in distinct conceptions of life. For this reason, civilizations take on the status of belief systems and articles of faith among different peoples. According to Huntington (1993:25)

> Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, custom, tradition, and most important, religion. The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizens and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing ways on the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy.

Based on these claims, Huntington identifies seven major civilizations: Western, Islamic, Orthodox, Latin America, Indic, Japanese and African *(ibid)*. This categorization has shaped diverse thoughts, ideologies, and belief systems, producing a constant struggle for dominance and influence among civilizations. They first affirm this leadership within their originating group and then extend it outwards as they seek to influence the broader humanity. Thus, civilization can be understood as a claim to a particular vision of human nature—one that others are expected to accept or at least acknowledge.

Yet every civilization has had to appeal to science in order to safeguard and justify the options it proposes. Science offers humans measurable knowledge of nature and motivates the ethics of technology which directs scientific insights towards particular ends. The human societies have always had the challenge of establishing order without resorting to war. Achieving order peacefully requires an ethics of peace and

such an ethics depends on the conception of human nature mediated through the humanities operative within a given cultural context. This is where the humanities play a huge role. The entire structure of the state concerns law and order—whether that order manifests as confusion, injustice, oppression or violence. My claim is that the pursuit of order, more than any moral virtue, has likely motivated the creation of the state. However, it is the humanities that must have to step to engage the state, guiding its functioning to ensure its survival without resorting to war or crisis. Thus, the humanities have a role to play in the formulation, formation and organization of the state. It is because of this that each state develops its conception of God, law, and order through its understanding of rights, the individual, the citizen, and the group. This grants substantial worth, weight and value to the humanities. Whatever civilization there is, have been or will be, depends on the available ethics of humanities to function. Next, I proceed to the idea of digital humanities and the promises it holds. By doing this, it becomes possible to suggest the future direction of the humanities and may play a role in shaping that future.

The Idea of Digital Humanities
Digital humanities refer to the application of digital achievements in support of the scholarship in humanities. They involve the exploration and expansion of the humanities through the resources and tools of the digital world. A relevant perspective of digital humanities is offered by Petti Ozaa, who writes:

> Digital humanities is an interdisciplinary field that combines computational tools and methods with traditional humanities scholarship. It involves using technologies like data mining, visualization, text analysis, and digital archives to study and interpret cultural artifacts, literature, historical documents, and other humanities-related materials. Digital humanities enable new research approaches, enhance data-driven analysis, and foster innovative modes of storytelling and communication.

From this, digital humanities may be understood as the intervention of digital technology into the humanities with the aim of generating, enhancing, and distributing the intellectual resources of the humanities scholarship. A vivid illustration of the impact and force of digital humanities can be seen in the phenomenon of Artificial Intelligence. Artificial Intelligence refers to "creating information-processing systems that can do things which we typically classify as intelligent were a human being to do them, such as reason, plan, solve problems, categorize adapt to its environment and learn from experience". The term *AI* was first coined in 1950 by researchers including John McCarthy, Marvin L Minsky, Nathaniel Rochester and Clause Shannon during a workshop at Dartmouth College, Hanover, USA. Their vision was to develop machines capable of using human language abstraction, and conceptual reasoning to solve problems traditionally reserved for humans, and to continuously improve themselves (McCarthy 2021).AI implies, in my view, that tasks to which humans ascribe intelligence can also be performed by

machines—sometimes even more efficiently—depending on what is involved and desired. In this way, AI challenges the science and arts of being human. Digital humanities have taken a very influential form such that it can be said to have a remarkable influence on the humanities at the moment and indeed a number of scholars have engaged the idea. But digital humanities go beyond the phenomenon of AI. It encompasses the application of a wider range of digital activities such as TikTok, Facebook, Telegram, etc.

Digital humanities are expanding the domain of humanities by widening the possibilities of humanities. For example, through digital humanities a broader comprehensive study of an issue or item in the humanities can be achieved almost effortlessly than was the case before this time. It has led to more collaborations by making it possible for more data and more knowledge to be achieved. It has brought more possibilities to the humanities and consequently widened the scope of human possibilities. Here we see the effort to mirror the possibilities of technological device for human advantage.

If the above submission is correct, it is then possible to suggest that digital humanities widen the humanities and creates more possibilities for the humanities. Indeed, by deploying digitalism to any aspect of the humanities a fresh knowledge could be achieved. For example, by looking at technology and philosophy, technology and history, technology and music, technology and theatre, etc., new disciplines within the humanities emerge with possible job opportunities. In the same way by looking at how technology reconfigures medicine and the human implications of this such as implicated in the discipline of medical humanities; by looking at the Digital culture and social ethics of –new disciplines emerge. What the digital world of learning is telling us is that at the moment, there is a virtual world which is as influential as the physical world and the extent to which the human community can advance depends on how much it reads this virtual world. Consequently, there is a sense in which it can be said that new humanities or new forms of human ordering are emerging through digital humanities and that the extent to which this is acknowledged is the extent to which it will be beneficial to all.

But how may we measure the gains of digital humanities? What are the critical input that digital humanities have added to the humanities to make it different and influential to the growth of the humanities? There are at least three possible ways to measure the gains that digital humanities have added to the humanities. This is the area of (a) production, (b) distribution and (c) consumption of knowledge. By production is meant how and where knowledge in the humanities is produced. At the moment, knowledge is produced in diverse and different ways through audio, visual, digital platforms and depositories. Currently, it is possible to carry out research and conduct interviews with and about people in different parts of the world through digital platforms. It is possible to apply digital devices such as the AI to create imaginary humans and achieve knowledge through these and apply this for research.

By distribution is meant how knowledge is distributed. Today, knowledge is distributed through digital applications including YouTube, Podcast, websites, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc. By consumption, I imply the digital world is providing fresh avenues for knowledge consumption such as through online publishing, open access publishing, etc. By promoting humanities scholarship, digital humanities have come to expand and widen the ethics and norms of readership and by so doing provide leadership to the humanities.

Digital Humanities and the Future of Humanities
In this part of the work, I will locate the emergent forms of humanities that are propelled by the digital world and discuss the possible outcome of the future of humanities through digital humanities. A number of literatures have been generated in this area: Kirschenbaum, M.G. (2012); Ade Bulletin, 150, 55-61; Berry, D.M. (2012); Ramsay, S. (2011); Oza, Preeeti (2020), etc. To address this section of the work, it should be recalled that our paper has held that the humanities is supposed to lead to a humane society and to account validly for what the human community have made of themselves. But this is what is now referred to as traditional humanities. Thus, I will discuss digital humanities vis-à-vis the role that has been assigned the humanities- the nurturing of a humane world and the providing a valuable account of what human beings have made out of human nature. I acknowledge the fact that this role is changing and would want to reflect on the implications of this change and what it would mean for the humanities to redefine itself in another context.

wealth has become the measure for the outcome of the humanities scholarship.

The claim that I am making is that the digital world is reconfiguring the humanities in favour of technology but this is not without dire consequences. They include the desire that the humanities become more scientific in terms of applying the paradigm of science to measure the humanities. Secondly, there is the growing money economy of knowledge or what is called digital economy- that is, how much monetary value they add to the world. I do not doubt the huge gains of this state of affairs but I argue that these gains should not obscure the dangers implied and implicated.

Disciplines are now created with the view to locate how it may serve the goal of digital humanities and key into the driving force of the humanities in vogue-digital humanities. Thus, there is what can be called a shift in the study of human nature in favour of technology and the digital force of the world and not vice versa. Through digital humanities, it seems to assume a whole new status for the humanities leading to almost whole new humanities that can reconfigure the ethics of thought. This new brand of humanities motivates the emergence of a new idea of man- the digital man. Thus, it appears that digital humanities is leading to a new human group that are defined by their digital capacities and capabilities. But when one takes a cursory statistic of this among the human community- then the gaps and questions begin to raise themselves. In the production of knowledge, it is almost a norm today that a

scholar must be cited to valued. In other words, the knowledge produced is measured by who knows that the knowledge is produced and who finds this valuable. In doing this the digital culture is deployed but it does not enquire to what essence a particular publication or knowledge is valued and who values it this way.

Whereas the humanities is expected to produce forms of knowledge that engage the human nature for human ends, the humanities have currently gone to a different path through what amounts to the technologization and commercialization of human nature. This is that of seeing the humanities in terms of how it adds to the quantity of goods and services and the commodities of other human and not how much the human is human as an ethical or ontological end of being human. Here to be human has become what is applicable; what falls within the value of the market- what is white or what belongs to west or what approximates the west. This is questionable. It is not favourable, as I see it, to the future of the humanities.

The humanities as a field of enquiry promises and produces three kinds of epistemic goods. These includes practical goods such as policies and theoretical goods such as views, perspectives and theories that animate and advance thought. The practical epistemic goods are supposed to have direct impact on the people's lives. These epistemic goods rhyme with three forms of knowledge that are offered by the humanities-*doxa, theoria and techne*. Aristotle in his book *Nichomachean Ethics* Book VI distinguished five intellectual virtues-*episteme, techne, phronesis, Sophia* and nous. These virtues correspond to different ways knowledge are sought. Episteme is about the search for eternal truths. Techne is about applicable knowledge which can be called artistic and productive knowledge. Phronesis is about the knowledge that concerns the human actions and the domain of ethical life and thought. Sophia is about the metaphysics of things. It functions above episteme in seeking to know how this and all other forms of knowledge emerged. It is the contemplation of eternal truths. Nous is about intuitive grasp of first principles. This is where knowledge is born while others is where knowledge is bread and buttered. But the tragedy of this is that the human being is now applied as a means to an end and not an end in himself or herself.

Day in day out the humanities are desired to explain itself in terms of its practical gains and output- in terms of its measurable gain. The epistemic goods produced by the humanities through an elaboration of the human idea –love, knowledge, justice, happiness, peace, equity, order, security, empathy, compassion, respect, obligation, cooperation, rational and critical thought, etc. The desire is made for these to explain themselves in terms of its quantifiable gain.

But some fundamental issues arise from digital option. I apply it to summarize what I consider to be the problem of humanities driven by digital humanities. The first(i) is what I call the technologization of the human idea that is championed and promoted by the digital humanities and how or whether it can enhance the human

dignity. If the human is narrowed to the human as it can apply digital technology or be applied by dignity technology how does this secure the human idea? The second (ii) is the digital divide that emerges from this and the exclusionary options offered by this. By this I mean that much of what happens through digital humanities are for those who have the economic force and capacity to function within this range-what happens to those who do not have this capacity? The third (iii) is how digital humanities affects the human idea- that is- the idea of the human that emerges from this and how it can be said to tally with the fundamental idea of the human-by this I mean how or whether digital humanities, while generating knowledge for the humanities would be able to address those deep thoughts that constitute the substance of the humanities.

The challenges of technologization, exclusionism and lack of depth on the human idea which is implicated in the idea of digital humanities are what impairs the humanities when read through the lense of digital humanities. Thus, the claim that this work is making is the digital world, while it is extremely good and beneficial for the advancement of the humanities, could obliterate the entire mission of the humanities, if the future of humanities is entirely to be determined by this aspect of the humanities. I therefore propose that a modified digital humanities is a more plausible option for the humanities-one that deliberately infuses the ethics of traditional humanities to digital humanities.

Conclusion

The focus of this work has been to engage the humanities through the lens of digital humanities. The work has outlined that nature of humanities which it captured under two divisions- the traditional humanities and the digital humanities. The work then mapped out and discussed the gains of digital humanities and the future possible pains that could come from digital humanities. One of this is that the traditional role of the humanities- which is that of securing and elevating the human idea may be obliterated through digital humanities. It has also emphasized how the very essence of humanities- that is- that of leading to humane world could be defeated through the idea of digital humanities. It is hoped that this work will widen the reading of digital humanities and that scholars interested in the new area of humanities enquiry would find the work relevant in advancing more critical thoughts on digital humanities.

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