Response to Canada’s Fundamental Science Review 2016

The Canadian Society for Digital Humanities/ Société canadienne des humanités numériques (http://csdh-schn.org/) welcomes the opportunity to offer feedback on fundamental research support in Canada. We write on behalf of and following consultation with our membership, which comprises faculty, librarians, administrators, instructors, academic workers, and graduate and undergraduate students working in the Digital Humanities in English and French, as well as many other languages including Greek, Latin, and Japanese as well as many European languages. Our community has, on the whole, been well funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and Canada Foundation for Innovation programs. Our other funding and support sources are diverse and include MITACS, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Council on Information and Library Resources (CLIR), Compute Canada and its regional consortia, CANARIE, and, via in-kind contributions, other organizations from within and beyond the academy including archives, innovation centres, arts groups, galleries, social justice organizations, and First Nations. Our association is committed to advancing opportunities for research and career advancement to students, trainees, and early career researchers, as well as to those underrepresented in the broader academic community.

Notwithstanding the overall solid level of support from a range of sources, we believe there are some significant gaps in Canada’s research funding ecosystem resulting from a lack of understanding the nature of much digital humanities work, and that this is resulting in missed opportunities for building leadership and capacity in research and in the training of culturally sensitive and technically adept knowledge workers. As a fundamentally interdisciplinary field of research and development, digital humanities is situated at the intersection of disciplines including computer science, literary studies, history, information science, design, classics, geography, and business, and has impact well beyond academia. The misunderstanding that our field addresses the humanities and academic concerns more narrowly results in funding deficiencies. For example, the British Columbia Knowledge Foundation has removed Arts and Humanities projects from their list of disciplines for matching funds from the Canada Foundation for
Innovation, which means that members of the community are unable to access CFI funding for digital infrastructure projects related to cultural heritage materials, notwithstanding the broad economic and social impact of such work. We are concerned that this puts some provinces at a disadvantage when it comes to attracting and retaining Digital Humanities talent.

Furthermore, the hierarchical structures of the academy are perhaps being disrupted in the digital humanities more quickly than in some other fields of research, with the result that some of the leaders in our field do not occupy traditional tenure track positions. Some are “alternative academic” scholars, such as technical researchers or librarians in roles understood by many to involve support rather than research initiative. Although such scholars increasingly occupy leadership roles in the field they are not able to lead Tri-Council grant applications. Others are promising early career scholars who are the future of our field but who are not well served by grant structures that assume a full-time academic job, and who may find themselves unable even to apply for grants because university research offices will not permit them to apply.

In addition, we lack funding streams that recognize the specificity of the digital humanities, which can create problems at the adjudication stage. Other countries provide successful examples for navigating this situation and addressing these gaps. The National Endowment for the Humanities in the United States Office for Digital Humanities (http://www.neh.gov/divisions/odh) offers grant programs to fund “projects that explore how to harness new technology for humanities research as well as those that study digital culture from a humanistic perspective.”

The Arts & Humanities Research Council in the United Kingdom identified “Digital Transformations in the Arts and Humanities” as an interdisciplinary and collaborative research theme and eventually disbursed more than fifty awards under a set of interrelated calls. They also fund digital humanities projects under continuing schemes including the Standard and Early Career Research Grants funding models.

Other countries have provided excellent models for training high quality personnel in the digital humanities. In Ireland, notably, the multi-institutional, multi-disciplinary Digital Arts & Humanities PhD program (http://dahphd.ie) has trained dozens of PhD students in digital arts and humanities since its inception in 2011. Investment in this Ireland-wide training programme for the tertiary education sector has made Ireland an international leader in the field of digital humanities. Although not strictly research funding, funding for the training of emerging and early career researchers plays an integral role forming an ecosystem for producing world-leading research and projects.

CSDH/SCHN appreciates the priority the Government of Canada is giving to higher education and fundamental science through this review and other initiatives.

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