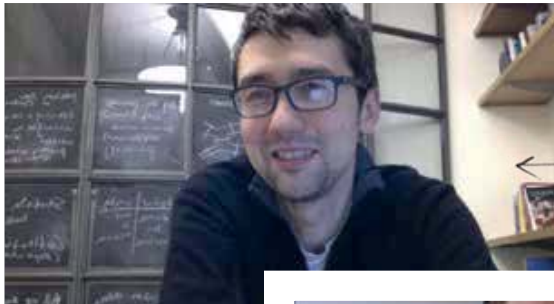


Supporting intellectual exchange and community building

A Google Docs-based discussion.
Facilitated by Patrik Svensson, (PS) HUMlab.



Dennis Tenen (DT)
Columbia University



Mathias Crawford (MC)
Stanford University



Shannon Mattern (SM)
The New School

• • •

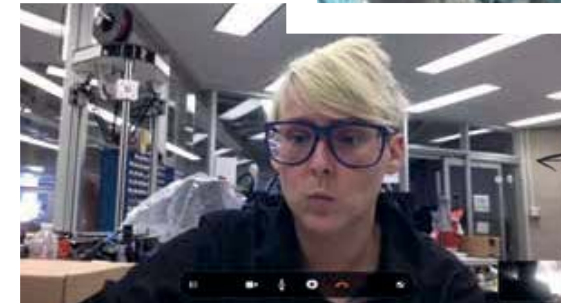
HUMlab as platform

Shana Kimball (SK)
New York Public Library



Matt Burton (MB)
University of Michigan

Nishant Shah (NS)
Leuphana University of
Lüneburg



Ginger Coons (GC)
University of Toronto

Supporting intellectual exchange and community building

- PS:** *Thank you for agreeing to take part in this brief discussion. You have all participated in HUMlab events over the last couple of years. What was your experience of the event you took part in?*
- GC:** In the two events I took part in, the biggest factor, to my mind, was the collaborative nature of the event design. The deliberate effort to include everyone's voice makes a big change from most of the academic events I end up at. Which is funny, because when we talk about our teaching, we recognise that the "sage on the stage" model doesn't work. The major joy of a HUMlab event, for me, is in the breaking-down of barriers between individuals who have often differing experiences and positions on the issue at hand.
- DT:** Visiting Umeå for the Media Places symposium was a super-charged marathon of formal talks, informal gatherings, and impromptu conversations. The austere winter serenity of the city gave contrast to the intensity of the discussion indoors. I thought: this is what all conferences should sound like; this is what classrooms should look like; this is how research should be done. It was fueled by frequent fika (the institution of the Swedish coffee break) and by the sheer brilliance of the participants.
- SM:** I second Dennis's comments. My first visit to HUMlab was for the Media Places symposium in December 2012. By the time we were off to the airport for our return flight to New York, I had already decided that this was the most enlightening, productive, collegial and heartening conference I'd ever attended. It reminded me that intellectual work is much more fruitful and pleasurable when it's done collaboratively, and with mutual respect and care and humour. The fact that all the conference attendees spent such an intensive period in one another's presence – in panels, at meals, on "field trips" to the gorgeous Bildmuseet and around town (the New York Crew was particularly excited to discover the public library's mechanical book sorting machine!), in the hotel dining room for late-night chats – meant that we had precious opportunities to extend our intellectual discussions, to learn more about one another's work and academic lives, and, most remarkably, to create new partnerships and friendships.



HUMlab as platform

“By the time we were off to the airport for our return flight to New York, I had already decided that this was the most enlightening, productive, collegial and heartening conference I’d ever attended.” Shannon Mattern

- MC:** I attended the “Sorting the digital humanities out” conference in December of 2013, and I’ll echo what has been said by the others here. December was an exceptional experience for me – I believe HUMlab provided a much-needed space for junior scholars to experiment with new modes of thinking (and doing), and to try to convene new and important conversations about the future of academic research.
- MB:** I want to re-emphasize the point about the incredible people that were brought together for “Sorting the digital humanities out” in December 2013. The confluence of a northern Sweden in the dark winter, plus the balance of formal and informal activities created the setting for an amazing group of people to work, talk, think and – most importantly – play together.
- SK:** I also attended the “Sorting the digital humanities out” conference in December 2013. The experience was extraordinary for me; rather than merely attend a conference, I became part of a community. As a practitioner who has worked with academics on digital research and scholarship projects for nearly 10 years, I have never experienced the level of hospitality, connection, and general bonhomie – all in the context of high calibre intellectual exchange – as I did there.
- NS:** I want to acknowledge that while I have been to HUMlab twice physically and once virtually, engagement with it exceeds beyond just the location of the lab. Even before I had the pleasure of coming to Umeå and spending face time with people, I was already engaging with the very structure and ideas that HUMlab as a space was generating. The scholarship, pedagogic and research experiments were meeting

me at different nodes across the globe. For me, the most incredible part of being at HUMLab was to see a conflict of knowledge, practice and research in the most generative way. In all my visits, what has always stood out for me is how HUMLab events are not just conferences, but field sites. They are politically anchored. They encourage discordance as much as they foster synergy. They allow for people with different vocabularies and interests to come together, and instead of glossing over the differences, they produce glossaries of differences, making them work through intersections of discourse, practice and play.

PS: *Sometimes I find it difficult to articulate exactly what I think these events do, but my hope is that they are more than just isolated events and that they have some kind of more substantial impact. I certainly feel that you are part of the texture of the lab and I hope that we can be part of suggesting ways of doing things, thinking and being. What is your sense?*

GC: The first time I attended an event at HUMLab, I walked away from it energized and excited. Even if I don't think of it as a tangible kind of belonging, there's definitely a feeling of being marked by the HUMLab. There's value in the intensity of interaction, which goes a little further towards building up a lasting network than simply listening to people talk. Working with other participants, building things with them, makes it feel like a more significant experience, less transient.

DT: I went home with new ideas and new confederates. I do not exaggerate when I say that these relationships had a long lasting impact on my research. Several projects came out of the New York City contingent following the symposium. We

“There’s value in the intensity of interaction, which goes a little further towards building up a lasting network than simply listening to people talk.” Ginger Coons

communicate regularly to this day. The digital humanities studio space at Butler Library was conceived in the spirit of HUMLab. These are just some of the reverberating “spillover” effects that came out of the conference.

SM: Again, I agree with Ginger and Dennis. HUMLab, with its enviable spatial, technological, intellectual, financial resources – along with its capable and generous staff – provides an infrastructure for creating an “ideal” intellectual community: one that’s global and interdisciplinary; one that considers what it means to collaborate, then actually collaborates in making something with lasting value; and one that critically reflects on the nature of its work. There’s an ethos to HUMLab that many of us would love to emulate at our own institutions – if only we had a similarly rich infrastructure!

MC: I’m actually surprised at how persistent the academic and personal relationships that I made while in Umeå have been. The relative isolation of the HUMLab relative to the American academic world provided an ideal opportunity for vigorous and productive debates, and for identifying new potential areas for future collaborations. Despite being jet-lagged and sleep deprived, there was a real energy and vigor in all of the conversations I had, and I think this is a testament to a combination of process, people and infrastructure that is unique to the HUMLab.

NS: This resonates very strongly with how I think about HUMLab. My very first visit, for instance, was to give a lecture on intersections of political action and digital technologies in the Global South. However, it wasn’t just a one-off lecture. It was located at unusual intersections – where motion capturing technology presentations met local policy and political landscape, research-in-progress interfaced with scholarship from the past. And underlining all of this, is the infrastructure of affect. Warmth, support, trust, generosity of resources and spirit, make sure that most people leave with a desire to return, and with a sense that of something personal and special having happened.

MB: I feel like my visit to HUMLab has made me part of a global community of interdisciplinary scholars. These events and the HUMLab itself act like a kind of physical and social space,

a mix between Peter Galison's trading zones and Karin Knorr Cetina's *epistemic cultures*, of which I am delighted to be a part. Something, something, *sociomateriality*. :)

SK: Like the others, I feel as though I am now affiliated with HUMlab, part of its extended global network of scholars and practitioners.

PS: *We run most of our events in the labs. Did you find being situated in this way useful? Are there drawbacks?*

GC: The only drawbacks I can imagine arising from the lab setting are capacity issues. But that's not a bug, that's a feature. Getting a smallish number of people around tables together offers a very different experience from the high-capacity lecture hall.

NS: I see the lab as a node within a network. And every time I have been there, either through the formal bringing in of different stakeholders, or through informal engagements and site visits, the events have always challenged the notion of physical space for the events. The lab, in its brick, mortar and digital infrastructure, is a great space because it is open and yet it draws a curated list of interested people. At the same time, it seems to be so embedded in traffics of thought, politics and intellectual exchange that I have not really seen it as limited. In fact, I find the energy and the multiple entry-points and inroads, both in terms of people and approaches, quite fascinating.

DT: Yes. The site was an important part of the experience, as it suggested a particular structure to the conversation. The symposium took place next to open spaces: the architecture studio with large-scale fabrication was happening as we spoke; an automotive foam modelling shop that could produce full-scale designs, a museum exhibition. Along with HUMlab, where space is also consciously designed for knowledge production (rather than accidental, as it often happens in the university), these situations helped ground abstract thought in a concrete sense of process and materiality.

SM: I returned to Umeå to give an individual lecture in May 2013; this event was held in the labs, which was an appropriate venue. The December 2012 Media Places symposium was distributed across a number of venues on various campuses.

“I can't really imagine how these events could be run in another space. The lab, in all its pixelated glory, was a first-order participant in ‘Sorting the digital humanities out.’” **Matt Burton**

This distribution not only exposed us to the myriad forms of thinking and making that take place at Umeå University, it also provided an appropriate backdrop to – and inspiration for – our discussions, which examined various means of knowledge production. And as Dennis noted, the fact that the venues for formal presentation were adjacent to less formally programmed public spaces allowed us to continue our discussions organically.

MC: While I think that the lab was a great setting for our conference, I am less convinced that in itself it is all that important. I was extremely impressed by the multi-screen array that was used during our presentations, but I think what was more important was the commitment to moving around the space, and using the entire venue for our activities. That is to say, I think that the value of the HUMlab comes from its combination of well thought out space, and the advancement of new types of knowledge (or artefact) production.

MB: I can't really imagine how these events could be run in another space. The lab, in all its pixelated glory, was a first-order participant in “Sorting the digital humanities out.”

I thought the lab provided an excellent setting for the conference: it was a platform for multiple modes of knowledge exchange and creativity, of intimacy and connection, of formality and informality. A really unique environment and set of experiences for an academic event.

Supporting intellectual exchange and community building

- PS:** *Has the connection with HUMlab helped you any way in your work or thinking about what you want to shape yourselves (whether as a model or a counter-model)? [applies to junior scholars, but not only of course]*
- GC:** Even before visiting HUMlab, I'd imagined my ideal future work environment as a collaborative lab environment. On a silly note, my experience of HUMlab has made me add beanbag chairs to that ideal. On a serious note, my interactions at HUMlab have made me realise the importance of cross-institution collaboration and pollination.
- DT:** My visit came at a time when I was just starting out in the field and only beginning to make my work public after graduate school. It helped me find a sense of an audience and of a community, somewhere at the intersection of digital humanities, media theory, and science and technology studies. I imagine that audience as I write still.
- SM:** This might sound trivial, but my experience at HUMlab reminded me that some of the most productive and pleasant experiences in the academy are informal. We need to make space and time to hang out together – not only because this “unprogrammed” activity can generate great ideas, but also because it can forge strong and meaningful social bonds.
- MC:** Ditto to Ginger's comments, except for the beanbag chair. I think also that the HUMlab has made me think about what I have at the d.school at Stanford University, and has reinforced my belief that there is an interplay between culture, space and individuals that, when thoughtfully designed for, can be immensely satisfying and useful.
- MB:** I want to second Shannon's comments above. The informal and “unprogrammed” activity was the most productive for me. Opening up and providing a space for the informal social work created and strengthened bonds that have persisted beyond my short stay in Umeå.
- SK:** I also want to second Shannon and Matt's comments about the importance of the social element in academic work. The friendships I forged there were profound and have been lasting.
- NS:** HUMlab, in my intellectual and my administrative narratives, has become a solid reference point of getting so many



HUMlab as platform

things right. The exchanges which have started there, individually as well as collaboratively, have already emerged into exciting ventures that we are planning for the future. The Digital Gender workshop, for instance, is already growing as a larger umbrella for a range of publications and events that we want to do together in multiple locations and sites. And what is the most reassuring for me is that HUMlab seems to be a space of trust, where I feel like I can experiment and know that somebody will be watching my back. This is more than collegiality.

“We need to make space and time to hang out together – not only because this ‘unprogrammed’ activity can generate great ideas, but also because it can forge strong and meaningful social bonds.” Shannon Mattern