

The Making of the Humanities VI  
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# The Emergence of Laboratories in the Humanities: Impetus, Implementation, and Impact

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## Outline:

1. Three narratives of transformations within the university, the humanities and culture.
2. The lab history in the humanities, media, and cultural studies: a visual map.
3. The impact of laboratory on the development of new humanities: the 'laboratory humanities'.

## Three Narratives of the Laboratory Turn

1. Infrastructural changes in the humanities in the context of the history of the university.
2. Paradigm shifts in science and social science from the 80s/90s of the twentieth century.
3. Cultural paradigm shifts.

# 1. Infrastructural changes in the humanities in the context of the history of the higher education.

## ● The beginning of the twentieth century

- In the nineteenth century the humanities was a part of natural science; therefore, based on its methodology, it was distinguished by precise and analytical research.
- At the beginning of the twentieth century, the university developed the modern system of disciplinarity, which consequently contributed to the independence of the humanities.
- Departing from a 'laboratory methodology' was accompanied by moving from laboratory towards office and library.

## ● The 1960s/1970s

- In the face of social challenges, the university was considered as an instrument of social reform that plays a constructive role to change society and increase equality of opportunity.
- The 60s is a time of the establishment of new fields, such as women's studies, African American studies, ethnic studies, and the proclamation of new turns in the humanities (structuralism, social and political turns, etc.).
- The humanistic research took place in offices and libraries, focusing on theoretical examination of text, language, rhetoric, and social discourse, all later accused of being detached from broad-based reality.

- **The 1980s/1990s**

- The idea of the university as an agent of social reform with the power of knowledge was gradually replaced by an entrepreneurial university.
- The new vision of the humanities has been amplified by new turns, such as performative, transdisciplinarity, and practice turns. Performativity, blurring of the genres, and the idea of praxis were considered as a step towards moving beyond the walls of office to public.
- Humanities institutes were established on the model of scientific research institutes.
- Building the humanities centres: the major purpose of new physical place was to 'center interdisciplinarity' and launch a common space for the university and community.
- Media labs as the first labs beyond the science (e.g. Media Lab Helsinki at Aalto University launched in 1993)

- **The 2007s/2008s**

- The economic crisis in 2007/2008 significantly affected the state of the university and the humanities.
- The move from the image of the university as a place of knowledge, inspiration, and freedom for critical thinking towards the idea of 'university as a company'.
- The process of scientification of the humanities has taken different forms, including reconceiving institutions (building the humanities laboratories), research materials (data), methods of conducting research (collective practices), applied methodologies (cultural analytics, data mining), and methods of evaluating research (parameterization).
- Digital humanities has entered into the academy as a computing humanities in the 90s of the twentieth century, then evolved from 'a set of practices' towards institutionalized field after 2007 becoming a 'next big thing' in the humanities.

## 2. Paradigm Shifts in Science and Social Science from the 80s/90s of the twentieth century

- The most significant shift in the concept of science was the move from the 'science as a knowledge' towards the 'science as a practice'.
- The perspective of science as a social practice opened up new questions regarding :
  - a place of 'doing of science' (the investigation of laboratory as a 'system of fact construction'),
  - community of practice (scientific community as an 'epistemic culture'),
  - social practices and the agency of scientific actors, embodiment of scientific practice and the function of material instruments and artifacts .
- Establishing the laboratory studies focused on the investigation of place of scientific research (Latour and Woolgar 1979, Knorr Cetina 1981, Lynch 1985, Hannaway 1986, Latour 1987, Knorr Cetina 1992, Pickering 1995, Knorr Cetina 1999).

### 3. Cultural Paradigm Shifts

- The *'innovation monomania'* - the 'innovation' has begun to be a crucial category defining the humanities labs and signifying its new features, including a strong link between the humanities and the creative industries, providing cutting edge equipment for excellent research, and solving hard problems.
- *'Big-picture thinking'* - the purpose of the humanities is also to provide 'big ideas' and solve 'big problems' by using a traditional method of critical thinking and new ways coming from applied technologies.
- *Creativity* - establishing 'creative spaces' that integrates local community around the processes of creative endeavors. One of the societal creative spaces is laboratory arisen in a common space that is library.
- *'Maker movement'* - created as a 'return to craft' when people can build things again together and as a response to industrial, consumption and corporate culture. 'Do-It-Yourself' approach made inroads into the academic culture by launching makerspace and hackerspace, and organizing hackathon.
- *Community culture* - collectivity and public engagement began to be common categories used to describe the humanities labs.

## A Brief History of the 'Laboratory Boom' in the Humanities

- The first laboratories have been established in media studies since the 80s/90s of the twentieth century (Laboratory Paragraphe at the University of Paris 8 in 1983, Media Lab at MIT in 1985, and Media Lab Helsinki at Aalto University in 1993).
- Since 2007 the situation has been significantly changing by moving the idea of the laboratory to other humanities departments (Global History Lab at Princeton University in 2007, Critical Media Lab in English Department at the University of Waterloo in 2008, and Scholarship Lab in library at the University of Virginia in 2008).
- 'Laboratory boom' after 2010: laboratories in the humanities established not only as a physical place but also as a hub, consortium, virtual project, platform, program, course, idea...



A Visual Map of the Humanities, Media and Cultural Labs

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Aalto University, 2017

Start Exploring

South America

North America

Europe

Asia

Africa

Australia

America

Australia

South America

Europe

A right-pointing arrow icon is located on the right side of the map.

## The 'laboratory humanities':

- The humanities as technology-driven field
- The humanities as situated practice
- The humanities as collaborative practice
- The humanities as problem-based research

**Thank you for your attention!**

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