

AHRC/ Digital Transformations

Audio slide show transcription

Narrator:

The constantly evolving digital age is transforming every aspect of our lives - from the way we buy our clothes, food and books, to how we watch and listen to music and films, study history or perform artistically. While this revolution has greatly enhanced our world it has also created new challenges, ranging from how we access and store information to issues surrounding intellectual property, data security and privacy. The Arts and Humanities Research Council has therefore identified Digital Transformations as a priority area. Professor Andrew Prescott is Chair of Digital Humanities at King's College London and Leadership Fellow for AHRC's Digital Transformations theme.

Professor Andrew Prescott:

Well I think we've all become very familiar with the way in which we are using digital technologies to increase access to cultural heritage, to explore books, sounds, films in new and different ways. There's a feeling that really we need to now start thinking about moving on to the next stage which is looking at the way in which these technologies can help us develop completely new ways of thinking about, and engaging with, the arts and humanities and with cultural heritage in particular, to actually come up with new types of vision as to the way in which scholars can approach this material. That's the heart of the thinking of the Digital Transformations Theme.

Narrator:

As a historian Andrew is keen to establish whether our current Digital Revolution has any similarities to other transformative periods in the past such as the Printing and Industrial Revolutions.

Professor Andrew Prescott:

A parallel is frequently drawn between what's happening now and the arrival of print in the Fifteenth Century. If you look at what bibliographers, many historical bibliographers are saying, they're suggesting that actually the arrival of print wasn't such an immediate game-changer as maybe we thought, and that it took a very long time for the modern distinction between manuscript and print to really work through in a big way. I think it's

actually interesting to look at the Industrial Revolution from that point of view because I think we tend to think of the Industrial Revolution a bit like it was in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, a man with a big tall hat comes along, waves a stick and all these chimneys appear. But again it was actually a much more patchy, complex, regionalised process. It's actually extraordinarily difficult to pin down what the factors that made for growth were, how that growth worked. So I think it's very interesting to historicise our present experience, and again I think that's something that the Arts and Humanities can bring to bear on those debates, that we could actually suggest that some of the more extreme statements made by techno-enthusiasts are ones that, in the light say of historical knowledge, should be challenged. I think that might actually then feed through into the way in which you're thinking about, economically how you're handling some of the new digital technologies that are emerging.

Narrator:

Because the internet is used by so many of us as our main source of information for news, entertainment and study Andrew says that the Arts and Humanities have a major contribution to make in helping to decide how material is presented and accessed. In terms of study, for instance, information provided on the web can often be overly simplistic, out of date, incorrect or biased.

Professor Andrew Prescott:

This is actually one of the more *recherché* but very interesting areas of, well both humanities and computer science research, there's a strong crossover. Often there isn't the kind of theoretical and critical quality that we might look for in Arts and Humanities research and we need to bring that more to bear. The other big issue is the commercialisation, the commodification of the web. I think we might feel that we've just gone through a sort of golden age where a great deal of stuff was available and we are moving towards an age where it's going to start to be much more fragmented, much more commercially controlled.

Narrator:

This AHRC theme is also linked to the Research Councils UK 'Digital Economy' Theme which is looking at the impact of digital technologies on society, culture, the economy and our communities. This multidisciplinary approach is reflected in many research projects that are already underway.

Professor Andrew Prescott:

One area that for example interests me very much is the role of 3D printing. 3D printers are becoming increasingly commonplace and are being used, for example, to create

spare parts for machines, even in medical science for creating, for example, spare hips for hip replacements. What interests me is the implications that sort of technology can have for cultural heritage. There was a wonderful exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum called Industrial Revolution 2.0 where 3D printers had been used to create new types of art objects which were placed around the museum so as to provide a commentary on objects in the museum. That again seems to me a very good indicator as to completely new types of engagements which are starting to become available. One of my current enthusiasms is an illustration of the sort of way in which boundaries could be changed by new technologies. It's around the idea of bio-conductive inks which a group at the Royal College of Art have been working on. It's an ink that conducts electricity. So instead of having a switch on the wall you could have a painting of a switch on the wall and touch the painting of the switch will switch the light on and off. I meant that's interesting just at the level of art but I work particularly a great deal on the history of manuscripts and I start to wonder what happens if you could have a manuscript that, for example, could trigger sound in that way. Could you hear what sound a poem makes, could you connect it across in different ways? Those are the sorts of things I think are very interesting to explore. Why that example particularly fascinates me is that it's something that's come out of work on the digital arts that could feed through into thinking about humanities in way that changes the sort of material that humanities scholars might work with.

Narrator:

So the digital transformations that society and the economy are undergoing at the moment go so much further than simply just putting information online. Andrew says it's essential that the role of the Arts and Humanities is seen as a vital part of the process of how we embrace and adapt to change.

Professor Andrew Prescott:

I think what it comes back to at the end is that part of our capital in this country is cultural capital, just as important as the capital that's tied up in railway infrastructure, in airlines and all the other things. The reason why digital technologies are so important is that they give us new ways of unlocking, developing, making available and exploiting that cultural capital that we've got. One of the very interesting areas I think, one of the great success stories in Britain, has been in recent years the creative industries and how we exploit the potential interplay between creative industries and humanities research, I think that's something that comes out very strongly from this theme and would benefit from that sort of investment.