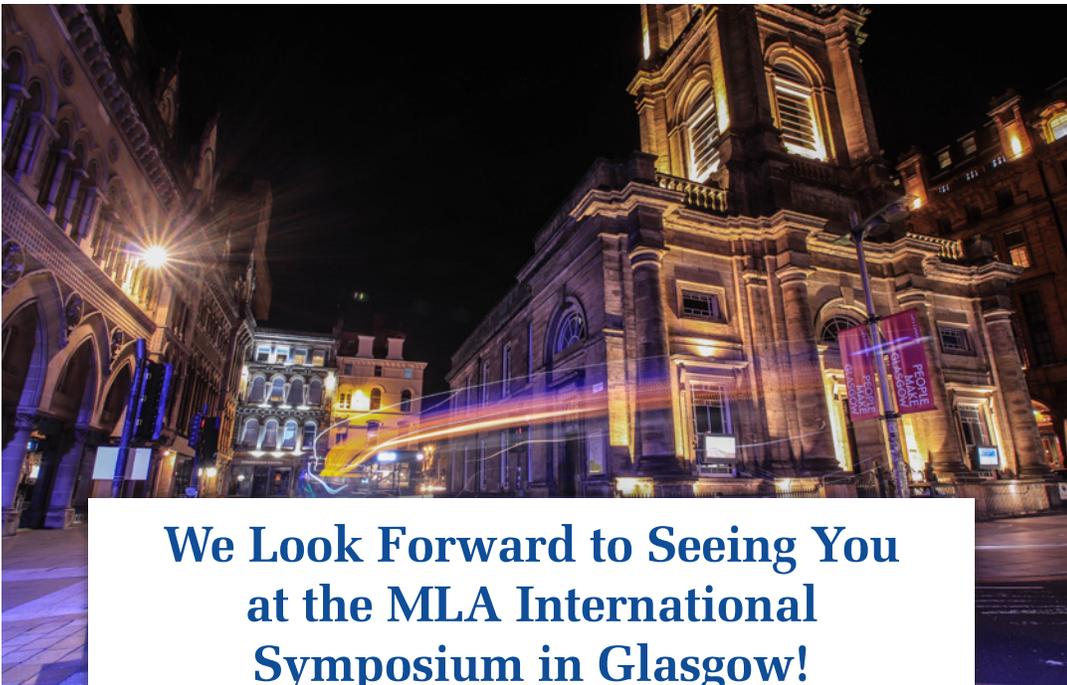


Volume 54
Number 1
Spring 2022

MLA Newsletter



**We Look Forward to Seeing You
at the MLA International
Symposium in Glasgow!
2–4 June 2022 • symposium.mla.org**

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What Everyone Says about the Humanities

1. What does it mean that in the news the humanities seem to have no objects except books, while the sciences are object-rich (e.g., space telescopes, exoplanets)?
2. What does it mean that newspaper obituaries of ordinary people mention the humanities surprisingly often?
3. And why in these newspapers is the humanities “crisis” invisible?

These questions emerged from the *WhatEvery1Says (WEIS)* project (we1s.ucsb.edu/), started in 2013 at the University of California, Santa Barbara, by the initiative *4Humanities* and advanced in partnership with California State Uni-

versity, Northridge, and the University of Miami from 2017 to 2021 with support from the Mellon Foundation.

Searching for the word *humanities* and related terms in a wide spectrum of news publications in the United States and in social media, *WEIS* sampled coverage of the humanities in a broad social sense and in an academic sense. Organizing and tagging its corpus by source type, location, and other criteria, and extracting word frequencies and other derived textual features, *WEIS* created open data sets for computational analysis. It also made subsets of data that come with interactive visualizations of

computational models—for example, *WEIS*’s “C-1” collection (“Collection 1”) and topic models of US mainstream, local, and student news.

The *WEIS* project’s main analytic method was topic modeling, complemented by other distant-reading methods (see “Key Methods”; fig. 1). Topic modeling assists in understanding large numbers of texts by identifying thematic topics along with their relative weights and statistical associations with specific documents. Distant reading dovetailed with close reading by steering *WEIS* researchers to

(continued on p. 4)

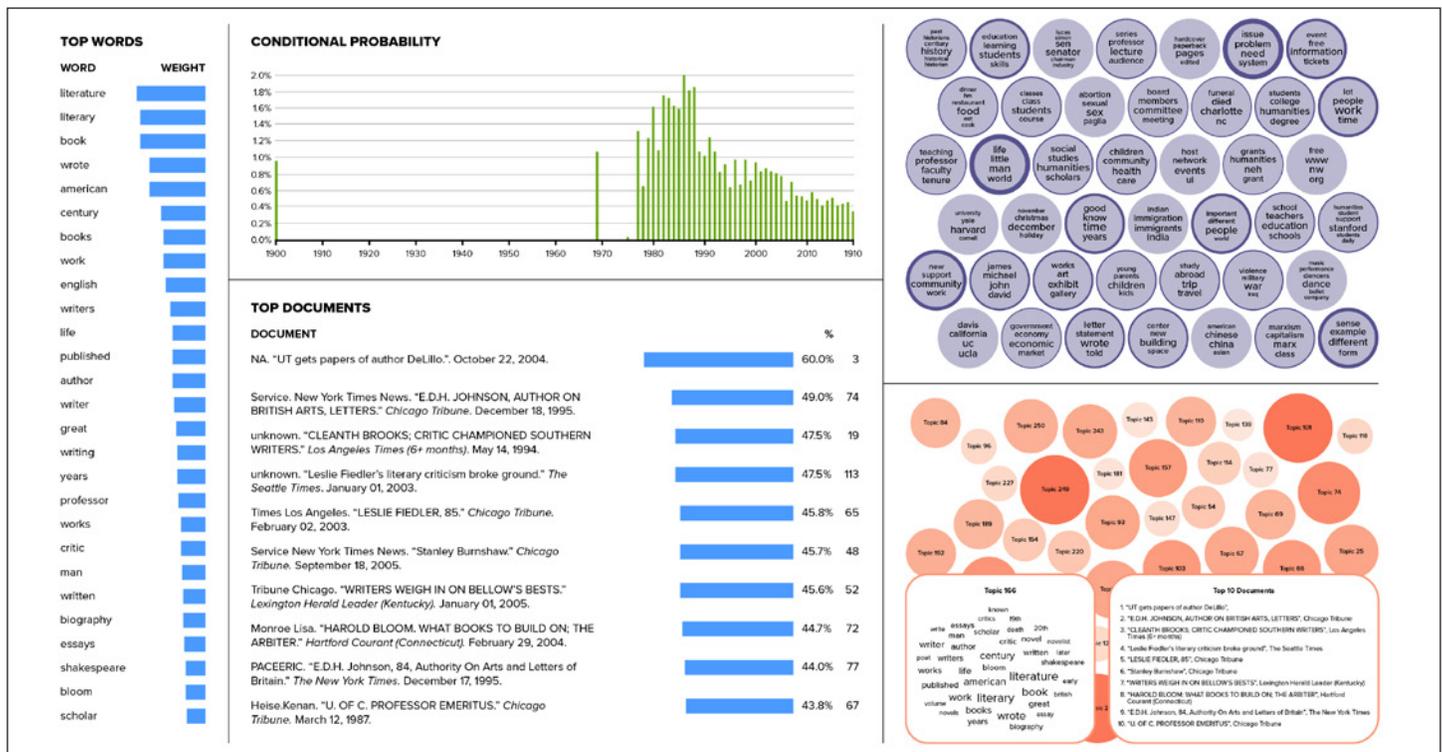


FIGURE 1. (Left and top right) Topic model of *WEIS* Collection 1 (250 topics) shown in Andrew Goldstone’s Dfr-browser interactive visualization tool, adapted for *WEIS*. Shown are a detailed view of a “literature” topic (#166) listing frequent words and articles statistically associated with the topic, and a grid view of other topics (with most frequent several words identified in each circle representing a topic). (Bottom right) Same topic model shown in Sihwa Park’s TopicBubbles interactive visualization tool (created as part of *WEIS*).



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Research for All

Comment on this column at
president.mla.hcommons.org.

IT'S HARD NOT TO BE IMPRESSED BY the humanities' sheer mass appeal. In the wider world, they flourish. There is no end to the public appetite for TV series, films, news stories, novels, histories of figures and events both global and local, narrative revelations of hidden forces, dreams of better worlds, and "long read" explainers of everything. This unending narrative engagement involves all the topics and methods found in the study of language and literature and is often produced by people who either majored in MLA disciplines or enrolled in their courses. Those enrollees were twenty-two percent African American, Latino/a, or Indigenous by 2015, helping to develop new ideas while challenging the overwhelming whiteness of today's big culture industries ("Racial/Ethnic Distribution").

Yet too often academic humanities are not seen as connected to the humanities

It would be understandable for us to downplay a focus on research, given the booming inequality of working conditions in higher education today. Most college instructors are overworked on the instructional part of the job. Only a minority of MLA members are expected to devote most of their best hours to scholarship; still fewer are rewarded or celebrated for it. And yet for us to see research as a minority preserve is to echo a core mistake of US culture, which casts creative intellectuality as the mark of an elite.

What is humanities research? We know *research* to mean systematic inquiry into an issue for the purpose of explaining something that is not currently (adequately or correctly) explained. I will skip nuances here in noting that research has at least three forms in the college or university: the creation or discovery of new knowledge, the transmis-

sion as knowledge creation, depends on and overlaps with the other two. Research and teaching cannot be dichotomized into separate functions. Our working conditions must support their mutual dependence.

Higher education overall aims at those same three things: the creation of new knowledge ("research"), the transmission of existing knowledge, and the creation of the capability to create new knowledge. All higher education institutions are charged with all three of these aims, though in very different ways. The second of these, transmission of existing knowledge, requires that teaching take place as close as possible to the existing knowledge frontier—that it be current, which requires instructors to have research time to keep it that way. The combination of two kinds of teaching, of existing knowledge and of the capability to create new knowledge, entails instruction in the intellectual history of a discipline and in its current state and debates. This allows students to see both where knowledge now is *and* how knowledge is a process of creation rather than an already finished product, that it is collaborative, that it changes over time through disagreement and re-direction. These issues are generally beyond the reach of high school. To repeat, neither type of teaching can be dualistically severed from research.

Research-based instruction is also central to the missions of community colleges. This fact is muddled by funding policy, the term "K-14," and the country's nervous vocationalism. In keeping with the underlying unity of tertiary learning, community college courses should be

“Research and teaching cannot be dichotomized into separate functions. Our working conditions must support their mutual dependence.”

out in the world. The mass appeal of the humanities is connected to creative productions—books, shows, plays, poems, nonfiction articles. Our academic work is research that is largely invisible to the larger public, or even to our own administrators.

sion and integration of new knowledge into a common knowledge base, and the collective process of acquiring the ability to absorb and use new knowledge. The second and third of these forms mean that research is embodied in teaching; the first, research traditionally under-

taught by instructors who either conduct their own research or are current in the research of their field—current because their working conditions allow them to read their professional literature as it comes out, and in sufficient volume. This labor can easily consume one day per week. Even in teaching for practical training certifications, such training should address not just how to apply rules to cases but also how to cope with cases when the rules don't apply. Colleges in all forms teach non-routine knowledge that is paired with the capabilities required to solve them. Community college is not an extension of high school; it inculcates the active use of knowledge to solve problems. "Transmission" also requires capability

with the processes by which knowledge is created in one's field.

In short, the public glories of literature and language are embedded in our academic research results, including their daily appearance in teaching conditions both basic and advanced, tenured and contingent, at two-year and four-year colleges. Every first-year composition counts. Making it count publicly will be helped by designing the institutional conditions—teaching loads, class sizes, recognized reading and research time—that would make the work of teacher-researchers viable across the entire profession.

What intellectual work do we want and need to do? Where do we want MLA fields to go in the 2020s? How should

we describe the working conditions we need to do the intellectual work we want? These are aspects of the presidential theme of the 2023 convention. I would love to hear everyone's thoughts on these others that matter most to you.

Christopher John Newfield

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International Symposium Preview

The MLA International Symposium will take place 2–4 June 2022 in Glasgow, Scotland. The symposium's theme, *Being Hospitable: Languages and Cultures across Borders*, challenges the current nationalist climate in world politics by inviting reflections on difference, hospitality, translation, intercultural dialogue, and related topics. During five plenary sessions over the course of the symposium's three days, participants will have opportunities to engage with accomplished keynote speakers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds.

CÉSAR DOMINGUEZ, an associate professor of comparative literature at the University of Santiago de Compostela, is a leading figure in the fields of ecocriticism, translation, cosmopolitanism, and world literature. His plenary will address migrants and refugees, transnational authorship, and hospitality in languages across the southern borders of Fortress Europe.

ALISON PHIPPS, professor of languages and intercultural studies at the

University of Glasgow, and a team of artists and scholars associated with the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Language and the Arts will lead a presentation entitled "These Are Our Neighbors: Hospitality, Cultural Justice, and Everyday Bordering." Taking its inspiration from recent protests in Glasgow against the detention of immigrants, the lecture will highlight "acts of revolutionary neighborliness."

VINCENT DEIGHAN, a Glaswegian comic book artist who publishes under the spooneristic pen name Frank Quitely, is best known for his *Batman* and *Superman* comics and his work on *Jupiter's Legacy*. In "Scotland's Hospitality: Frank Quitely and the Islay Legends of Bowmore Whisky," Quitely, in conversation with **LAURENCE ("BILLY") GROVE**, director of the Stirling Maxwell Centre for the Study of Text/Image Cultures at the University of Glasgow, will discuss his creative process and juxtapose his Bowmore whisky box artwork with images from the exhibition *Demon*

Drink, which assembles depictions of alcohol's vices and virtues throughout history.

ANKHI MUKHERJEE, professor of English and world literatures and a fellow at Wadham College, University of Oxford, will present a lecture entitled "Psychoanalysis of the Excommunicated." Mukherjee will draw on her research on psychoanalysis and community to discuss the inner lives of those who have been excluded from community, legitimacy, and a sense of social belonging by policies of the state.

JACKIE KAY, former National Poet for Scotland, who has written extensively about her experiences as an adopted child, will present "Come Ben the Living Room" in conversation with **COLIN HERD**, lecturer in creative writing at the University of Glasgow.

You can learn more about the MLA International Symposium and register to attend at symposium.mla.org.

articles associated with topics of interest. Researchers also conducted surveys and held focus groups at two of the project's institutions to learn how students see the humanities. Researchers then wrote one-page "cards" on findings, materials, methods, tools, and recommendations. On *WEIS*'s "Key Findings" page, for example, cards appear grouped under "humanities crisis," "value of the humanities," "broader profile of humanities in society," "humanities and social groups," "humanities and science," "students and the humanities," "humanities and social media," "humanities and ordinary life," and "humanities funding" (see fig. 2). Cards are the public face of a reporting system that scales up to long-form reports and articles.

So what did *WEIS* find that might interest MLA members and other humanists? To illustrate, here are answers to the questions above:

1. That the media shows the humanities to be object-poor suggests that the humanities fail to communicate the "stuff" of their work in public—not just in the literal sense of artifacts scholars see and touch, sites they visit, or things they restore or create but in the essential sense of ideas and practices. The humanities appear in the media instead in terms of their packaging—the programs, courses, talks, and events that contain the good stuff. News reports on the sciences start, "Physicists discover . . ."; by contrast, reports on the humanities start, "Professor to give talk on . . ." (an alternative view

could be that the humanities flourish in socially mediated contexts linked to audiences).

2. That there are surprisingly frequent mentions of "humanities" in obituaries—compared, for example, to mentions of science (see card KF-5-19 in "Key Findings")—epitomizes another conclusion. As the KF-5-3 and KF-5-8 cards headline, "The humanities are the art of ordinary life" and "The humanities are robustly public in everyday events and activities." With a nod to the sciences, *WEIS* researchers dubbed this phenomenon the "cosmic background radiation" of the humanities. The humanities diffuse through both routine and life-changing "ordinariness" in ways that typically go unaccounted for. *WEIS* found it important to study not only focalized "public discourse about the humanities" (e.g., op-eds elegizing the humanities) but also "humanities public discourse" that is less about than *of*, or *in respect to*, the humanities. Humanities public discourse is when a family includes in an obituary a simple mention of a loved one's humanities degree or activity. The mention didn't have to be there, but it matters that it is.
3. And where is the "humanities crisis" in the news? There are many environmental, social, political, economic, and other crises in newspapers; but, in comparison, the humanities crisis barely registers (see, e.g., the KF-1-1 card: "Top newspapers do not include the humanities within crisis discourse"). The humanities should reframe their crisis-anxiety within concern for public crises that require the sciences, social sciences, and humanities to search together for solutions—for example, "grand challenge" crises of climate, energy, hunger, inequality, or migration in which history, culture, religion,



FIGURE 2. Examples of one-page "cards" from the *WEIS* "Key Findings" page.

language, identity, and other humanities issues matter as causes, effects, or both.

Equally important, however, are null findings. *WEIS* researchers think they have found a major absence in mainstream media coverage of the humanities. Though *WEIS* devoted much of its investigation to how underrepresented racial, ethnic, gender, and other groups are positioned, or position themselves, in the media in relation to the humanities, researchers were disappointed to find sparse material in mainstream media. Such groups are in the news all the time in broader social, political, economic, and other contexts. They are also in the news in relation to STEM fields (e.g., articles about involving more women in science). But there is strikingly little attention in most media to these groups *in relation specifically to the humanities*—a lacuna that calls for follow-up research. Especially important will be overcoming problems researchers encountered in gathering more diverse journalistic sources that are either not well represented in the databases *WEIS* drew from or are difficult to collect and analyze at scale from databases that do include them (see Paiella, “Diverse Populations” and “Thoughts”).

Many other findings emerged from the *WEIS* project, and more will come if others use the project’s data or extend data collection to earlier or later times and to other nations. For more on *WEIS* and the issues raised here, visit we1s.ucsb.edu (see also Thomas and Droge; Liu et al.).

Alan Liu

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New MLA Style Course

MLA Handbook Plus, the institutional subscription platform for the *MLA Handbook*, now includes two companion guides, the *MLA Guide to Digital Literacy* and the *MLA Guide to Undergraduate Research in Literature*, as well as a new video course about MLA style.

The course, MLA Style 101, features ten lessons dedicated to the core elements of MLA style—like author, version, or publisher—and provides guidance on how to find publication information in various types of sources. Visual examples accompany the instructions, and “You Do” exercises ask students to reflect on what they’ve learned and answer questions along the way.

At the end of each lesson, students are prompted to take a short quiz to reinforce what they have learned. When they complete the course, students can test their knowledge with a final quiz. A transcript accompanies each video.

Access to the course is included with the *MLA Handbook Plus* Core Subscription, and additional courses are in the works. Visit mlahandbookplus.org to find out more about how your institution can subscribe.

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Alan Liu is distinguished professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), and principal investigator of WEIS. Other project principals are Jeremy Douglass (UCSB), Scott Kleinman (California State University, Northridge), and Lindsay Thomas (University of Miami). The project’s postdoctoral scholars at UCSB were Dan C. Baciu and Abigail Droge. Nearly a hundred researchers and others participated in the WEIS project, including seventy-six graduate and undergraduate student research assistants.

The *MLA Newsletter* (ISSN 0160-5720) is published four times a year (Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter) by the Modern Language Association of America, 85 Broad Street, New York, NY 10004. The *MLA Newsletter* is edited by the executive director of the association, Paula M. Krebs. The managing editor is Anna S. A. Chang. The cost of an annual subscription is \$8. The subscription price is included in the dues of all members of the association. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. All news items and letters should be sent to the *MLA Newsletter* at the above address. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *MLA Newsletter*, 85 Broad Street, New York, NY 10004. MLA and the MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION are trademarks owned by the Modern Language Association of America.