Conditional Texts, Visualizing Interpretation, and Other Humanistic Reflections on Big Data

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Large data sets differ from traditional textual or even statistical documents in ways that make it difficult to tie interpretation to a single, stable, object. Conventionally produced texts (print and manuscript) are described as "fluid" on account of the changes that are embodied in their migration from state to state. But digital data sets produce "conditional texts" as a result of queries, analysis, processing techniques and so forth. What is that status of these conditional texts as intellectual/cultural artifacts and how does their identity challenge traditional humanistic approaches to interpretation? What is the role of interpretation in data rich environments, and how is it to be visualized using tools that do not have humanistic foundations? Can we speculate on the design challenges raised by these issues, as well as some of the concerns for storage, access, preservation, citation, and argument?