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#### Editorial

#### Introduction

Those who appeal to humanism today defend a central role for human beings over increasingly alienating technical apparatuses and thus preserve values and ideals that are undermined by the growing role of machines and the marked autonomy that technical objects are acquiring. Simondon had already grasped this aspect when he argued that each era recreates its own humanism in response to the alienating elements that characterise it (Simondon, 2017, 118-121). Even if he does not highlight it, this was already the role played by the humanist instances present in antiquity, starting with the Greek paideia and the Latin humanitas, which were born respectively to counter barbarism with education and to defend a universal ideal of civilisation and the ethical formation of the free citizen. The same immunitarian dynamic was indeed participated in by late antiquity and medieval Christian humanism, which was found in the doctrine of creation "in the image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:26), a solid theological reference to safeguard the dignity of the human being and to attribute to him a central role in creation.

Simondon's reconstruction begins instead with Renaissance humanism, which emphasised freedom of thought against ethical and intellectual dogmatism and continues with Enlightenment humanism, which was able to rehabilitate techniques as a product of the human effort of rationalisation and as a reaction to hierarchies and social fragmentation, in the name of the universalising power of reason (Simondon, 2017, 118). To this reconstruction, we must add that we owe the development of the idea of individual autonomy to the Enlightenment sensibility, without which it would not have been possible to develop the human rights and dignity that found their most significant development in the idea of democracy, which was born to respond to the disasters produced by the totalitarianisms of the 20th century. It is no coincidence that humanist ideals flourished in the immediate post-war period as a reaction to the inhumanity of the Second World War.

The fact remains that the last century witnessed further forms of alienation. In contrast, in the 17th century, for example, technologies might have appeared to be emancipating forces, but this liberating function of theirs gradually failed in the industrial society of the 20th century. Indeed, the omnipresence of machines seemed to overcome and subjugate the forces of individuals, making them slaves of a dehumanising techno-economic system. Faced with this situation, according to

Simondon, the human being of the 20th century needed not liberation, but mediation, which is why, in a way, cybernetic thought represented a new form of humanism (Simondon, 2017, 120). The latter would liberate the human being from the closure of the technical system (without forcing him to free himself from the system itself), making him the judge (and possible re-constructor) of the systems of complex organisations rather than a subject to them.

The digital turn, which could, with good reason, be considered one of the legacies of cybernetic "humanism", has helped to create a technosocial system that tends to maximise efficiency and forces an asymptotic adaptation of the speed of response of the human component to the machine component. Even the political participation and new protagonism of individuals and communities that the Web seemed to have aroused are clashing with new forms of political control and economic exploitation. This is a new form of alienation, to which the everincreasing externalisation of human faculties or abilities is added to artificial systems. What does it mean to "remain human" in a technological environment that seems to operate with increasing autonomy and to take away from subjects' activities that have always been their prerogative? What humanism can respond to these new forms of alienation? Several theoretical projects have tried to answer this question, and some have explicitly claimed the label of "digital humanism".

### The dawn of digital humanism

The first occurrence of the term digital humanism comes from the title of an article by Arthur Kroker published by CTheory in 1995¹: Digital Humanism: The Processed World of Marshall McLuhan. One of the fundamental theses of the article is that McLuhan's account of the technological world is strongly influenced by his Catholic culture. Hisbelief in a Pentecostal, universalistic, and communitarian outcome of technological evolution would have significantly influenced his thinking. The very person who inaugurated media studies as the scientific study of media as objects, the one who theorised the preeminence of the medium over its content and who, indeed, asserted that the content of a medium is always another medium, is also the one who believed that the (human) way out of a world of despair could come through a technological epiphany.

McLuhan's ideas about technology are rooted, according to Kroker, in the tradition of Christian humanism, by which he means not so much the great Erasmian season with its attempt to reconcile the basic

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The first version of this article was actually Chapter 3 of Kroker (1984), but, in that version, the title was slightly different: *Technological Humanism: The Processed World of Marshall McLuhan*. In fact, throughout the body of the text, even in the 1995 version, the expression digital humanism never appears, instead it is always mentioned as "technological humanism."

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principles of humanism with Christian theology but rather the integral humanistic attitude found in the thought of Thomas Aquinas: an underlying optimism towards creation and the human creature, capable of reaching, through reason (and, with McLuhan, we would also say: through its technological extensions), the truth, albeit not in its fullness.

This is one of the possible, and perhaps very first, senses in which technological humanism, and thus also digital humanism, can be understood. The need to restore meaning to the human dimension in a hyper-technological society may give rise to apocalyptic responses or responses animated by an underlying optimism. Humanistic responses, even the most critical ones, would seem to be characterised by that optimism that characterised McLuhan's humanism.

After McLuhan's initial Canadian exploration of the possibility of digital humanism, the focus shifts to Europe, particularly along the Franco-German border. In France (albeit by a Lebanese scholar naturalised in the United States) and in Germany, the term *humanisme numérique*, *digitaler humanismus*, is again being used.

# Doueihi and the *humanisme numérique* at the Collège des Bernardins

Milad Doueihi's foundational work laid the groundwork for digital humanism within the French-speaking area, introducing "humanisme numérique" as a concept rooted in cultural objects' transformation through digital means. Doueihi emphasises a philological approach that respects the complexity of these digital transformations, advocating for a Vichian methodology (see Vico, 2020, 106) that adapts to the objects of study (Doueihi, 2011a; 2011b). This approach confronts the digital alteration of cultural objects and explores the broader implications of digital technology as a cultural force, shaping human interaction, identity, and societal structures.

Just as Renaissance humanism was a response to urbanism, the digital humanism envisaged by Doueihi is a cultural attitude typical of the new virtual urbanism. The new architecture and spaces for work, trade, and sociality between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance produced a new culture and a new way of rediscovering and reinterpreting the older ones' new languages and new habits. Thus, digital architectures represent concretisations of algorithmic rationality, which shapes the new digital environments and a new human habitus within the digital, all with the mediation of that language (technical, not understood by all, but whose effects produce tools used by all) that is the code.

In other words, digital technology has become culture today:

It is a culture, because the digital world, despite its having a large technical element that needs to be constantly questioned and monitored (because it is the agent of economic will), is becoming a civilisation that stands apart for the way in which it affects our view of objects, relationships and values, and which is characterised by the new possibilities that are being brought to the field of human activity. The digital world is a culture because it shows us that knowing how to live together and learning how to behave are integral parts of this emerging sociability, this hybrid sociability that forms the stage for bonds, bodies and mobility (Doueihi, 2013).

The digital experience alters our spatial and temporal dimensions, leading to fragmented digital identities. These identities are formed through unique digital literacy and ways of using digital objects.

The new digital architectures restructure social and political levels, causing a conflict between old hierarchies and new forms of cultural transmission. Digital identities, both authors and constrained by interfaces, navigate this conflict. The interfaces structure the digital experience, reflect design choices, and offer new possibilities.

Following and expanding these Doueihi intuitions, the Humanisme

Numérique department at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris has become a pivotal centre for advancing this vision of digital humanism.<sup>2</sup> It focuses on the interplay between digital technology and various aspects of human life, including journalism, law, economics, and the social implications of digital technologies. Their research examines the ethical, social, and political dimensions of digital culture, advocating for a critical analysis that moves beyond traditional boundaries and engages with the digital world's complexities.

Over the years, the department's research work, led by its directors Gemma Serrano and Graziano Lingua, has reflected on the changes induced by algorithms and big data in the practice of contemporary journalism, on the cartography and changes that the digital has brought to concepts such as "border" or "inhabiting", on the impact that artificial intelligence systems have on decision making autonomy and the rule of law or that blockchain has on the economy, on digital screens and their role as interfaces shaping human access to the world (Bodini, Carbone, Serrano & Lingua, 2020) has worked on developing a theory of digital sensibility starting with the discussion of digital images in contemporary visual culture (De Cesaris & Lingua, 2021). Particularly innovative lines of research undertaken within the Collège are those investigating the relationship between technology and theology (both from a historical perspective and by studying hypermodern forms of spirituality) and that which, with an interdisciplinary approach, starting with recent applications of affective computing, studies the implications of the digital at the level of prediction and manipulation of behaviour and the ethical and social impact of this digitalisation of affects (Serrano, 2021).

This body of work engages with digital culture's transformative effects, enriching the discourse on digital humanism and challenging it to embrace a broader, more inclusive perspective. The emphasis on a Vichian-inspired approach underscores the importance of adapting to the digital era's challenges, advocating for a dialogue between digital humanism and applied sciences, and suggesting a path toward a more integrated and ethically aware digital future.

# From Nida-Rümelin's digitaler humanismus to the Vienna Manifesto

In exploring digital humanism, an important distinction emerges between the French-speaking tradition and a broader approach that has captivated a global audience, transcending linguistic and disciplinary boundaries. Interestingly, despite thematic overlaps, this broader discourse does not directly stem from Doueihi's foundational work. Hofkirchner (2021) identifies a pivotal moment in 2015 with a Gartner Special Report (four years after the publication of Doueihi, 2011a), marking a departure from philosophical humanism towards a business ethics-orientated digital humanism that emphasises people over technological imperatives.

The true catalyst for a reflective examination of digital humanism, however, is Julian Nida-Rümelin. His-works on "digitaler humanismus," including a collaborative effort with Nathalie Weidenfeld (Nida-Rümelin & Weidenfeld, 2018, recently re-published in an enriched edition in 2023), advocate for a humanism that balances the liberating potential and ethical dilemmas posed by digitalisation. Their vision promotes a digital humanism grounded in Enlightenment values, advocating for human dignity, the democratisation of technology, and an educational mission that fosters independence of judgement.

Hannes Werthner's efforts to internationalise this dialogue through the 2019 Vienna workshop and the resultant *Vienna Manifesto on Digital Humanism* (Werthner, 2020) underscore a collective aspiration towards a society that places humans at the core of technological progress, advocating for democracy, inclusivity, and the safeguarding of human rights in the digital age. This approach, seeking to inform and transform

 $<sup>^{2}\ \</sup>mathrm{https://www.collegedesbernardins.fr/pole-de-recherche/equipe-de-recherche-humanisme-numerique.}$ 

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policy and technology design, aligns with Enlightenment principles and stresses the importance of engagement from all societal sectors to ensure technology serves humanity's best interests.

The Vienna Manifesto, thus, emerges as a call to action, urging a reevaluation of technology's role and impact on society, emphasising the necessity for ethical, inclusive, and democratically orientated technological development. This collective endeavour illustrates a dynamic and evolving field, urging continued dialogue and action to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by digitalisation.

Several books have recently been published that could be directly inspired by the values of the Vienna Manifesto. Examples could be those by computer scientists such as Lee (2020), who deals with analysing co-evolution in the difference between humans and technologies, or Russell (2019), who deals with the problem of AI systems and control. In philosophy, Schiaffonati (2020) notes how the emergence of digital humanism requires a clear methodological and epistemic definition that clarifies the difference in practice and experimental goals of artificial intelligence and autonomous robotics. Webster and Wyatt (2020) addressed the interrelation between technology, healthcare, and society, calling for a human-centred approach. Many then addressed the issue of the fate of democracy, amongst others, the futurologist Zarkadakis (2020).

Contributions by these and other scholars dealing with topics ranging from the impacts of digital on politics, economics, education, the arts, geopolitics, healthcare, etc., are collected in Werthner, Prem, Lee and Ghezzi (2022), a volume released in open access to disseminate as much as possible the call to action for responsible and value-orientated design and governance of present and future digital technology, and in the textbook Werthner et al. (2024).

## The Rome Call for AI Ethics

Following the exploration of the theoretical foundations and various manifestations of digital humanism across geographical and disciplinary landscapes, the *Rome Call for AI Ethics* marks a significant milestone in the ethical consideration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) at a global level. On February 28, 2020, a landmark document<sup>3</sup> was signed in Rome by the Pontifical Academy for Life, leading technology companies Microsoft and IBM, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the Italian Ministry of Innovation. This collective endeavour underscores a commitment to fostering an ethical framework for AI that respects human dignity and promotes a responsible stewardship of technology.

The Rome Call for AI Ethics introduces a comprehensive approach to integrating ethical principles into the fabric of AI development and deployment. It aims to ensure that technological advancement, while pursuing efficiency and innovation, does not compromise human centrality or the inherent rights of individuals. At the heart of this call is a plea for a new "algorethics," advocating for AI systems that enhance human capabilities without replacing human roles or prioritising profit over people. This initiative outlines three critical impact areas—Ethics, Education, and Rights—each embodying core values essential for AI's ethical development and application. Ethics emphasises the protection of freedom and dignity against discrimination by algorithms. Education focuses on preparing future generations for a world shaped by AI, advocating for inclusive and accessible learning that embraces the potential of AI to empower and enable individuals. The Rights section calls for regulations and principles that safeguard humanity and the natural environment, highlighting the importance of security and the protection of human rights in the digital era.

Central to the Rome Call are six guiding principles: Transparency, Inclusion, Responsibility, Impartiality, Reliability, and Security and

Privacy. These principles serve as the foundation for "good innovation," ensuring that AI systems are understandable, equitable, accountable, unbiased, dependable, and respectful of user privacy. The *Rome Call* represents a pivotal step towards a global consensus on the ethical governance of AI technologies. It encourages collaboration amongst stakeholders across sectors to promote an AI development ethos that places humanity and the environment at its core. This document reflects a commitment to ethical responsibility amongst its initial signatories and invites organisations and individuals worldwide to endorse and support its vision for an AI-enhanced future centred on human values.

#### **New frontiers**

A certain Eurocentrism is evident from this initial mapping survey. After all, even previous humanist enterprises have mostly been European cultural enterprises. Can humanism come to terms with this geographical narrowness that becomes both conceptual and social injustice? Posthuman philosophies and feminist philosophies, for example (see Lovibond, 1996; Soper, 1990), respond by opposing humanism as intrinsically linked to a Western, masculine view of the world. Humanism, by universalising the idea of the human being, risks neglecting the multiplicity of human experiences, pandering to a logic of domination based on a univocal and culturally determined conception of progress and rationality.

Anti-humanist tendencies have also emerged from decolonial reflection (Warren, 2018, pp. 169–172), motivated mainly by the realisation that the idea of humanity advanced by historical humanisms has often excluded (and dehumanised) entire populations or categories of people. They have also universalised the Western way of reasoning at the expense of other epistemologies and metaphysics (Viveiros de Castro, 2014).

These critiques have hit the mark and questioned the universal aspiration of humanism. However, they have not necessarily demolished the reasons behind a humanist project intended to respond to forms of alienation that, today, must include those indicated by posthumanism, feminism, and decolonial theories. What anti-humanist critiques have done is shift borders: if Enlightenment humanism, for instance, believed it included the whole of humanity within its boundaries, today, it is evident that this is not the case. It is also evident that digital technology poses differentiated challenges and particular kinds of injustice depending on gender (Tripaldi, 2023), race (Benjamin, 2019), geographical origin, and cultural background.

This constitutes an inescapable challenge for anyone claiming the legacy of humanist thought, mainly as a response to the alienations resulting from technological development: it is necessary to leave the usual territory and head for these frontiers, which are both promising and frightening.

### Contributions

In an attempt to explore the frontiers, this special issue starts from the known boundaries. In fact, amongst the contributions are authors belonging to two of the advanced lines of research mentioned above. These – amongst them also three of the editors of the special issue – take their starting point, therefore, from research carried out in recent years, to go further, to show the effectiveness of their model, and to place themselves in dialogue with what lies beyond the borders, to push towards the frontiers.

In *Principles of Digital Humanism: A Critical Post-Humanist View*, Erich Prem offers an insightful exploration into the emerging field of digital humanism in the Vienna Manifesto version. Prem delves into the absence of a universally accepted definition of digital humanism, distinguishing it from related endeavours through a critical investigation. The article articulates the foundational principles of digital humanism as its principal proponents advocate, highlighting the pursuit of human dignity and the aspiration for a society rooted in the core values of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> RenAIssance Foundation (2020). *Rome Call for AI Ethics*. https://www.vatican.va/roman\_curia/pontifical\_academies/acdlife/documents/rc\_pont-acd\_life\_doc\_20202228 rome-call-for-ai-ethics\_en.pdf.

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#### Enlightenment.

In *Digital Humanism as a Bottom-Up Ethics*, Gemma Serrano, Francesco Striano, and Steven Umbrello present an innovative take on digital humanism. They advocate for a paradigm prioritising multi-stakeholder dialogues and employing a bottom-up methodology to uncover stakeholders' values. This perspective marks a departure from more traditional, top-down approaches, such as that articulated by the Vienna Manifesto, by offering a more adaptable and comprehensive framework, thereby encompassing a wider array of ethical considerations, especially those relevant to the digital age.

Suppose these two contributions reflect humanism in the digital age. In that case, however, it must be borne in mind – as Prem does, in part – that post-human theories have severely challenged the centrality of the human being and his values that seem presupposed by any form of humanism. Can a humanism that takes the post-human into account be refounded? Can the post-human even reinforce a specific idea of humanism? Mark Coeckelbergh seems to be arguing this in his article, which stands as a critique of the Vienna Manifesto, sympathetic, however, to the intentions of the manifesto itself.

Coeckelbergh's contribution, titled What is Digital Humanism? A Conceptual Analysis and an Argument for a More Critical and Political Digital (Post)Humanism addresses the burgeoning interest in digital humanism within the academic sphere, probing the essence and implications of the term. This discussion paper embarks on a conceptual analysis of digital humanism, advocating for a rendition that leans towards a more critical, posthumanist, and politically charged perspective. Coeckelbergh calls into question the prevailing interpretations and applications of digital humanism, proposing a shift towards approaches that critically engage with the socio-political dimensions of digital technologies and their impacts on human society.

However, as mentioned above, the enterprise of digital humanism cannot be exempt from criticism and perplexity that comes not only from decades of reflection on the posthuman but also from feminist criticism from the decolonial perspective. This is why it seems legitimate to ask whether, in the first place, it still makes sense to talk about humanism, whether it is useful and in what form. This is what some other contributions ask themselves.

Do we really need a "Digital Humanism"? A critique based on posthuman philosophy of technology and socio-legal techniques by Federica Buongiorno and Xenia Chiaramonte, for example, highlights how digital humanism, especially in the form expressed by the Vienna Manifesto, brings with it some of the problems of earlier forms of humanism, such as an idea of the human as a homogeneous category, a more or less explicit anti-anthropocentrism and a focus on values linked to the individual sphere that panders to a neoliberal view of society, which would be a cause - and not an antidote - to risks associated with the technological development of the digital age, such as the impact on the environment or the increase in inequalities. The authors attempt to provide an alternative paradigm shift from the individual to the collective dimension, from the opposition between human and non-human to the perspective of a hybrid responsibility. In order to bring about this paradigm shift, they turn mainly to anti- or non-humanist theories but leave open the question of whether a form of humanism is understood as a response to the alienations of our time - and not as an attempt to place the human at the centre of the cosmos - can include the concepts of shared accountability and interdependence.

Similar is the starting point of Antonio Lucci and Andrea Osti in Exit (digital) humanity: Critical notes on the anthropological foundations of "digital humanism", who attempt to shed light on the philosophical anthropology implicit in the main forms of digital humanism. According to the authors, in the best hypotheses, digital humanism is implicitly based on the uncritical assumption of the privilege attributed to the sedentary lifestyle, to urbanisation, and to the "village", ignoring their historical origin. In its more naïve forms, on the other hand, digital humanisms directly incorporate gender stereotypes, Eurocentric and ableist. In general, however, the founding principle of every form of humanism to

date would seem to be that of an invariable idea of humanity, different from the rest of nature and using technologies as mere tools. The authors counter this perspective through a rigorous and well-documented analysis of both anthropological-evolutionary and individual-cognitive factors and suggest some correctives to digital humanism - the necessity of which is, however, finally acknowledged, at least by taking an ethical stance that considers the survival of the sapiens species on earth as a value.

The anthropology underlying the Vienna Manifesto's idea of humanism and Luciano Floridi's Onlife Manifesto are also the starting points of the paper. Are we done with (Wordy) manifestos? Towards an introverted digital humanism by Giacomo Pezzano, which distinguishes between an "extroverted" digital humanism - which would be prevalent today and orientated towards understanding how technologies change the world - and an "introverted" digital humanism - which analyses how technologies change us. The former aims at humanising technologies, and the latter aims at understanding how technologies can (re)humanise us. For an in-depth reflection in the latter field, Pezzano proposes to take the "technologies of philosophy" seriously, arguing that just as the technology of the book created the conditions for Renaissance humanism, so digital technologies can create the conditions for a reconceptualisation of the ideas of private sphere and public reason.

What seems to remain a fixed point in many forms of digital humanism - and in most of the interventions collected in this special issue is the need to "moralise technologies" to avoid or mitigate the existential risks that preoccupy human beings. What this means remains an open question: imposing "human" values, (re)negotiating them, rethinking the public sphere, etc. A different perspective, however, is the one Maurizio Ferraris expresses in Intelligence as a human life form: we must not confuse "human" with "ethical". In contrast to both the perspectives of digital humanism and the post-human, Ferraris tells us that incorporating values into an algorithm will not make the AI a moral agent and that this attempt is as futile as trying to moralise the knives that killed Caesar. The conclusion proposed by the author is not, however, that of a renunciation of the humanistic enterprise. For him, it would not be a question of founding a "new humanism" but of pushing humanists to codesign affirmative solutions and reasonable uses of technologies instead of using ethics to limit them.

#### Conclusions

The contributions to this special issue collectively navigate the intricate terrain of digital humanism, challenging and expanding its boundaries through a multiplicity of perspectives. From the call for a more critical and politically engaged digital (post)humanism to the interrogation of digital humanism's underlying anthropologies and ethical assumptions, these papers reveal the complexity and the urgency of rethinking humanism for the digital era. These contributions underscore the necessity of moving beyond a simplistic celebration of the human at the centre of the cosmos, advocating instead for a nuanced understanding of human-technology interdependencies and shared accountabilities. This special issue, therefore, not only serves as a critical reflection on the current state of digital humanism but also as a call to action for reimagining our ethical engagements with technology. It invites us to co-design affirmative solutions and harness the potential of technologies in ways that foster a more attentive, reasonable, and responsible digital humanism.

The journey is still long, and the frontiers have yet to be explored, but this special issue is the first attempt to map uncertain territory. We hope it will be helpful for anyone who decides to embark on the venture.

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