



# Liberal Education in the **Digital Age**

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# Part One

The Transformation of Knowledge Generation in the Digital Age.





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## Traditional Disciplines are being Transformed by the Digital Turn

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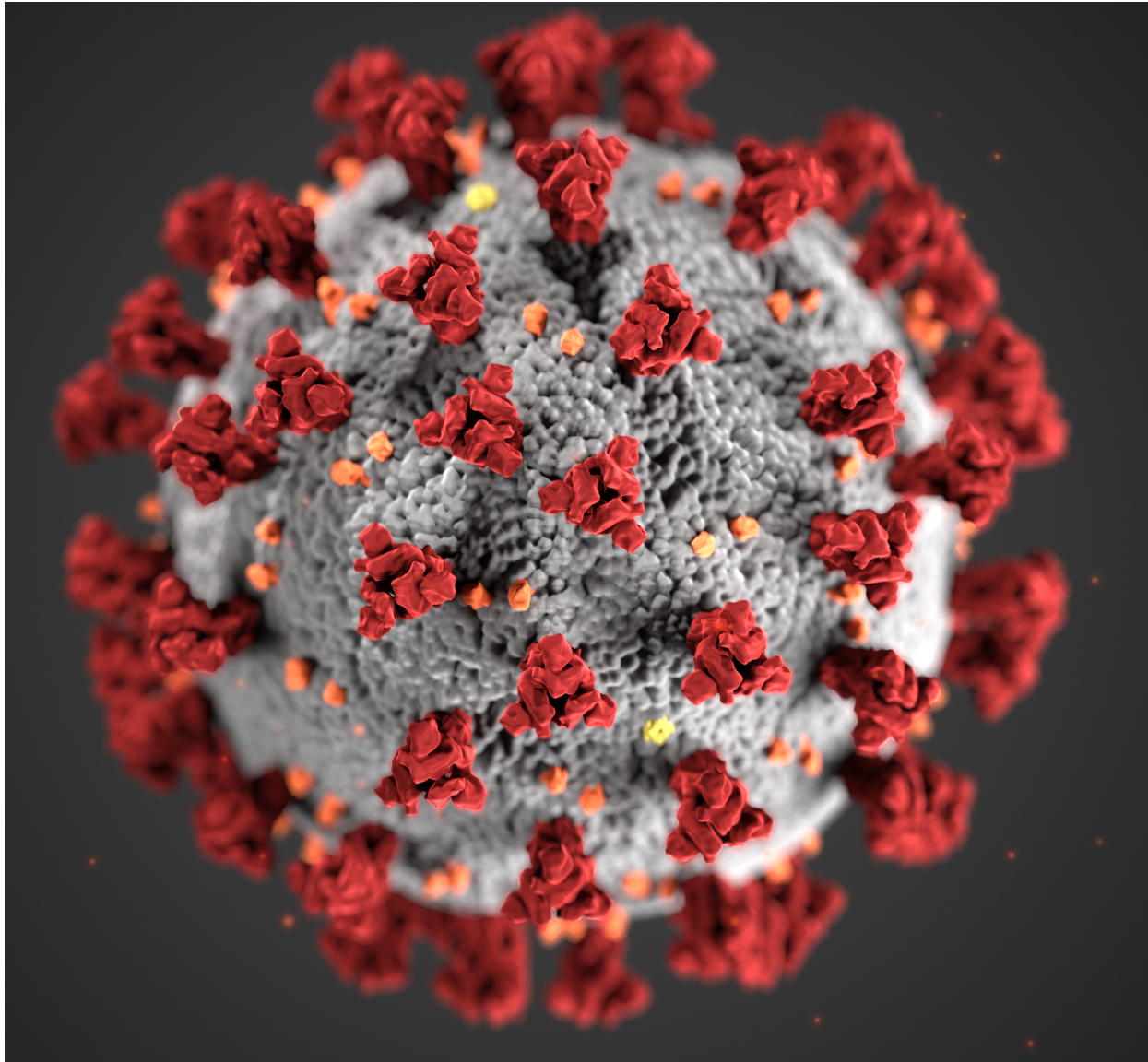
- **History** = a discipline that seems so traditional, has been dramatically transformed by the digital turn
- Some quick examples:
  - **Google Searching** for sources and information;
  - Retrieving **digitized newspapers** from comfort of a home office;
  - **Quick research trips** defined by a week of taking photographs to examine at home;
  - **Increasing amounts of information placed online.**

# Increasingly **Global** Outlook

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- Hat-tip to Lara Putnam, U. Pittsburgh
- Not uncommon to have an MA student not travel at all to a physical archive for their degree (in fact, I would say it is increasingly common);
- Not uncommon for a PhD student or faculty researcher to take trips numbered in days as opposed to weeks.
- Anybody can do global research projects – looking across oceans to archival resources that have been digitized – from first year onwards.





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**All of this has been accelerated by COVID – whole degrees, projects, forced to be completed from home.**

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# In two decades...

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- Historians have transformed from a discipline based at least in part on the lived-experience of researching in a place...
- ... to one defined by sitting at a desk and:
  - Google searching for sources;
  - Searching within JSTOR and ProQuest for primary sources;
  - And, in the case of most students, uncritically stitching together what they find into a hellish mishmash of sources
    - (this is not their fault; some of their professors do it too, and we're not training them anyways)





**The world is changing  
around us.**

**It's terrifying.**

**But done well, requires  
skills that benefit  
students and societies.**

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A photograph of two hikers with large backpacks and trekking poles ascending a steep, snow-covered mountain ridge. The hiker in the foreground is wearing dark clothing and a red backpack, while the second hiker is further up the ridge in blue and white gear. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and the snow on the mountain is bright and textured with footprints.

# Part Two

Meeting this Challenge





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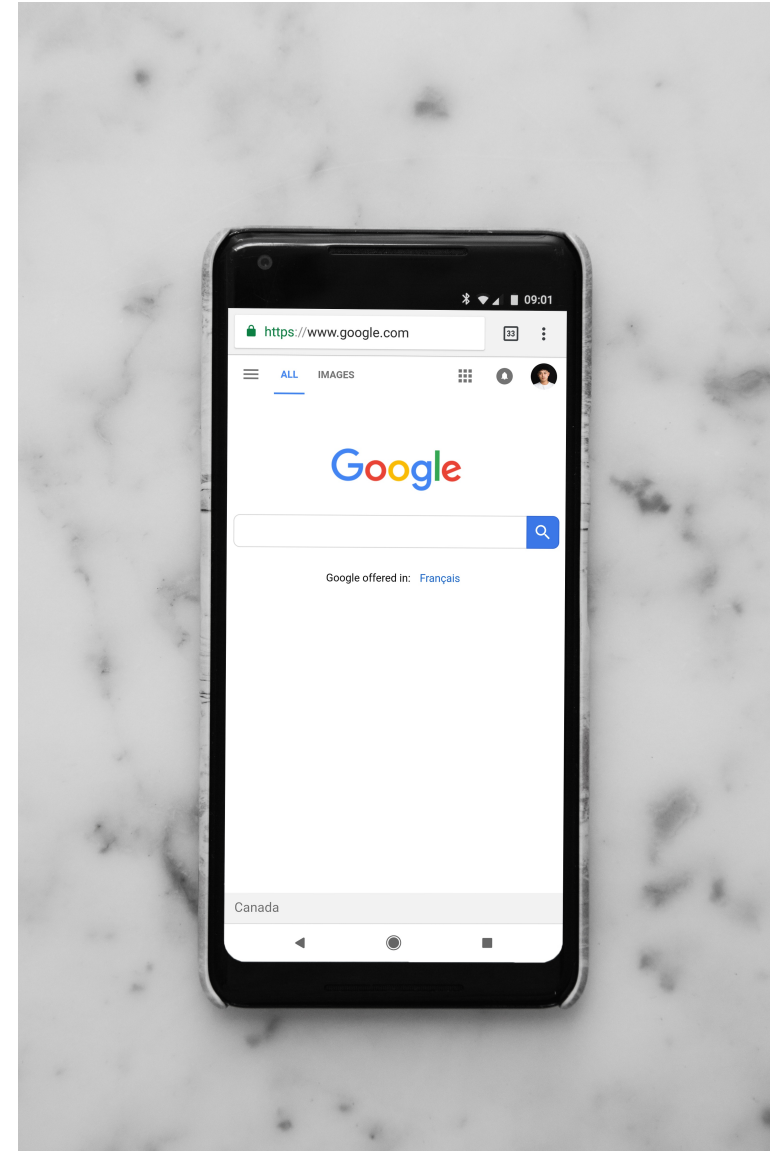
# How do we equip our students to meet this challenge?

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Three key skills.

# Algorithmic Bias and Awareness

- Why is this search result #7 (on the first page) versus #600 (on a distant page, never to be seen by human eyes)?
- Why was the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* digitized but not the *Toronto Telegram*?
- Why was material from this archive put on the Internet and not this one?
- Why is this book in Google Books and not that one?
- What information am I basing my decision on?







# Understanding Mediation and Context

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- Information is mediated in the digital age
  - A newspaper from a database, from a search engine, from the original, from a clipping files
- Information needs context
  - An archival document, viewed in a reading room – i.e. “Bomarc Missiles should turn around and blow up their silos” in 1962, vs. a snippet dragged out of a search engine
- Historical skills of understanding context more important than ever in the digital age





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## Digital Literacy More Generally

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- None of these forces are specific to history: understanding the context of information, how it is mediated, how it was created, and how it is delivered to you are key components of digital literacy
- The idea of the “digital native” is a misleading one.





# Part Three

Blowing up the Silos

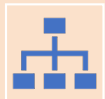
# The Balkanized University



History is a content-based discipline, so we often overlook these core methodological things



They cut across all programs, but universities struggle with these interdisciplinary kinds of programs



New and emerging budget models are great for transparency, but bad as they reify departments and faculties are business units





## A Successful Example

- Example course at the University of Waterloo: "Socio-Political Implications of AI"
- Funded by the Jarislowsky Foundation (donors can force you out of your comfort zone, so long as academic freedom is maintained)
- Students from all six faculties at UW; entrance by application online; working on collaborative projects; pass-fail grading (struggle with disciplinary variances); bridging faculty lines in their work.
- What if we could have more of this?

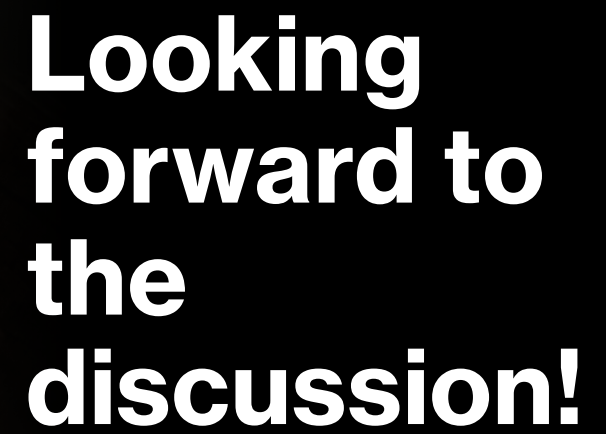


# In Conclusion

- Traditional disciplines are being transformed by digital technology
- This requires rethinking how we equip and train our students to meet this challenge, through an understanding of:
  - Algorithmic bias/awareness
  - Understanding mediation/context
  - Fostering digital literacy
- And probably requires some gentle rethinking of how we structure universities and liberal education in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century

A photograph of a dark, textured wooden surface. A white rectangular sticky note is placed on the left side, featuring the word "thanks!" written in a black, cursive script. A black pen lies diagonally across the wooden surface, partially overlapping the sticky note. The pen has some white text on it, including "N13".

*thanks!*

A solid black rectangular area. At the top, there is a short, thick yellow horizontal bar. Below this, the text "Looking forward to the discussion!" is written in a large, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom of this black area, there is a thin white horizontal line.

**Looking  
forward to  
the  
discussion!**