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PLENARY LECTURE IV

Culture Analytics, Folklore and Everyday Life: Epidemics, Bill Gates, Witches, Hobbits and K-Pop

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Culture Analytics--the data-driven analysis of cultural phenomena and their dynamics--has been greatly bolstered by social media, the 24-7 news cycle, the proliferation of mobile devices and the development of sophisticated algorithms in deep learning and network methods. Yet this same explosion in access to cultural data at very large scale comes with certain challenges, including methodological, analytical and ethical ones. In this brief presentation, I consider four experiments in culture analytics: (1) the development of a narrative framework extraction pipeline devised to understand the dynamics of conspiracy theories in online social forums; (2) methods for understanding the insider/outsider nature of the many threat narratives that proliferate on the internet and that have their counterparts in the storytelling of pre-internet days; (3) how people read and remember popular literature at very large scale; and (4) the explosion of TikTok challenges in the context of K-pop dance videos. Can we keep track of variation while also tracing the emergence of stable cultural forms? Along the way, we'll see how "math changes everything", allowing us to understand cultural phenomena at very large scale, and helping us test hypotheses related to the production, variation and circulation of cultural texts that lie at the very root of identity, belonging and expression.

Short Biography

Timothy R. Tangherlini is professor in the Scandinavian Department and director of the graduate program in folklore at the University of California, Berkeley. He explores informal storytelling at large scale in collaboration with colleagues from many different disciplines, including Electrical Engineering, Computer Science, Applied Mathematics, and Information Studies. Recent work has focused on determining the narrative frameworks of Pizzagate and Bridgegate; understanding how parents reached consensus on vaccine exemption thereby undermining enormous gains in the public health arena; following the emergence of diverse competing conspiratorial narratives during the pandemic; and tracing how seditious groups used internet forums to develop plans to storm the capitol.

