Top newspapers do not include the humanities within crisis discourse

Major U.S. newspapers typically treat large “crisis” topics, particularly those related to economics and politics, as issues in need of critical decisions (Greek κρίσις = “decision”). However, the humanities tend not to be included in media discourse characterized by alarmist rhetoric, or at most are peripheral to such discourse (see Fig 1).

This finding is supported by our analysis of Collection 4 (C-4), comprising 28,375 unique articles mentioning humanities (1977 to 2018) in the 15 top-circulation U.S. news sources. In topic models of these articles created at various numbers of topics, “crisis” or crisis-related words such as situation, trouble, dilemma, emergency, plight, etc. are highly associated with topics that are not focused on the humanities and do not contain humanities as a top-frequency word. A minor exception to this pattern is the word problem, which in a 250-topic model (C-4.250) is a top word in topic 231 (the university and research) and 197 (literacy). However, in the case of both these topics, problem is not near the top of the list of most frequent words. Similarly, in the 100-topic C-4.100 model of this collection, topic 5 (the U.S. economy) features both the words education and crisis among frequent words. But again these are not in the top tier of the term frequency list.

These findings about Collection 4 are corroborated by observations of our larger Collection 1, comprising 82,324 articles mentioning the humanities in a wider pool of publications see KF-4-3). In sum, models of our collections indicate that public discourse as represented by the media does not picture the current state of the humanities as an extraordinary juncture requiring critical decisions for the future. Instead, public discourse is oriented toward problems in the humanities as a constellation of related concerns (e.g., related to economics) rather than toward a crisis of humanities per se. (See in model C-4.250 the sample articles a, b, and c in topic 231 and d in topic 197). These concerns, however, are not exclusively specific to the humanities. Rather, they represent more general issues of employment (l), curriculum infrastructure (h, l), and ideology/discipline (e, f, g) within education in general (see details in KF-1-3).

The fact that public discourse fades the problems of the humanities into concerns with larger problems suggests that the humanities “crisis” is recognized only in specialized discourses (see KF# 1-3).

Fig. 1: Topics #235 and #243 identified by “crisis” keyword search do not show “humanities” or “education” as key words (viewed in TopicBubbles)

Topic model of this collection: C-4.250 (250 topics)
Interesting sample topics in the model: #231, #197
Representative articles: a, b, c, d
Evidentiary documentation for this key finding: WE1S Report