

How to Avoid a Bonfire of the Humanities

'English majors are exactly the people I'm looking for,' one successful Silicon-Valley entrepreneur recently told me.

By **MICHAEL S. MALONE**

A half-century ago in his famous "Two Cultures" speech, C.P. Snow defined the growing rift between the world of scientists (including, increasingly, the commercial world) and that of literary intellectuals (including, increasingly, the humanities). It's hard to imagine the sciences and the humanities ever having been united in common cause. But that day may come again soon.

Today, the "two cultures" not only rarely speak to one another, but also increasingly, as their languages and world views diverge, are unable to do so. They seem to interact only when science churns up in its wake some new technological phenomenon—personal computing, the Internet, bioengineering—that revolutionizes society and human interaction and forces the humanities to respond with a whole new set of theories and explanations.

Not surprisingly, as science has grown to dominate modern society, the humanities have withered into increasing irrelevancy. For them to imagine that they have anything approaching the significance or influence of the sciences smacks of a kind of sad, last-ditch desperation. Science merely nods and says, "I see your Jane Austen monographs and deconstructions of 'The Tempest' and raise you stem-cell research and the iPhone"—and then pockets all of the chips on the table.

All of this may seem like a sideshow—in our digital age the humanities will limp along as science consolidates its triumph. There is, after all, a distinct trajectory to industries and disciplines that are about to be annihilated by technology. Typically, those insular worlds operate along with misplaced confidence. They expect an industry evolution; they fail to recognize that they are facing a revolution—and if they don't utterly transform themselves, right now, it will destroy them. But of course, they never do.

I watched this happen in almost every tech industry, and now it is spreading to almost every other industry and profession. Medicine, education, governance, the military and my own profession of journalism. And so I found myself earlier this year talking with the head of the English department where I teach. The department's tenured faculty had been reduced to just a handful of professors, many nearing retirement; the rest of the staff was mostly part-time adjunct lecturers. And the students? Little more than half the number of majors of just a decade earlier. I had seen this before.

I asked him: How bad is it? "It's pretty bad," he said. "And this economy is only making it worse. There are parents now who tell their kids they will only pay tuition for a business, engineering or science degree."