

DIGITAL HERMENEUTICS: FROM RESEARCH TO DISSEMINATION

International Conference and Workshop at the GHI Washington, October 10-12, 2019, co-sponsored by the GHI, the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH), and the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (RRCHNM). Made possible by grants from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and the Friends of the GHI. Conveners: Andreas Fickers (C²DH), Sean Takats (C²DH), Gerben Zaagsma (C²DH), Daniel Burckhardt (GHI), Simone Lässig (GHI), Jens Pohlmann (GHI), Mills Kelly (RRCHNM). Participants: Edward L. Ayers (University of Richmond), Rosalind J. Beiler (University of Central Florida), Simon Donig (University of Passau), Katherine Faull (Bucknell University), Pascal Föhr (State Archive of Solothurn), Sean Fraga (Princeton University), Frederick W. Gibbs (University of New Mexico), Jane Greenberg (Drexel University), Katharina Hering (GHI), Anne Heyer (Leiden University), Torsten Hiltmann (University of Münster), Tim Hitchcock (University of Sussex), Rachel Huber (University of Lucerne), Diane Jakacki (Bucknell University), Micki Kaufman (The Graduate Center, CUNY), Christian Keitel (Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg / Potsdam University of Applied Sciences), Daphné Kerremans (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), Amy Larner Giroux (University of Central Florida), Ursula Lehmkuhl (University of Trier), Alan Liu (University of California, Santa Barbara), Peter Logan (Temple University), Maret Nieländer (Georg-Eckert-Institute — Leibniz Institute for International Textbook Research), Sarah Oberbichler (University of Innsbruck), Jessica Otis (RRCHNM), Atiba Pertilla (GHI), Lodewijk Petram (Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands), Andrew R. Ruis (University of Wisconsin-Madison), Achim Saupe (Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam), Stefania Scagliola (C²DH), Silke Schwandt (University of Bielefeld), Jennifer Serventi (National Endowment for the Humanities), Juliane Tatarinov (C²DH), William G. Thomas III (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), Tim van der Heijden (C²DH), Thomas Werneke (Humboldt University, Berlin).

The conference began with four hands-on workshops. The first workshop addressed the theme of “Digital Hermeneutics in Education.” It included presentations, demonstrations and hands-on exercises organized by Stefania Scagliola on how to integrate elements of the Ranke 2.0 teaching platform for digital source criticism in humanities curriculum, and by Frederick W. Gibbs who reflected on strategies for enabling students to create and contribute to digital community-based

history projects. Both speakers discussed the practical challenges such projects inevitably bring, but also emphasized the possibilities of digital platforms and tools to promote active learning and engagement with history. For instance, by means of an interactive quiz or through the co-creation of GitHub-based webpages for disseminating local history.

The second workshop was organized by Maret Nieländer and Thomas Werneke. While Nieländer explored the use of the text mining tool DiaCollo for performing collocation analysis of historical text corpora, Werneke discussed various ways of doing text mining and distant reading with regard to the field of historical semantics. Katharina Hering showed in the third workshop on “Digital Resource Criticism” how to develop and read a multidisciplinary Zotero Group Bibliography. The problems following the division of infrastructure between academia and archives were discussed and conditions on both sides of the Atlantic were compared during the workshop. Finally, in the fourth workshop, Andrew R. Ruis demonstrated how to use the nCoder as a new tool for merging close reading methods with computational text analysis.

In the late afternoon, the program continued with a round-table discussion by Rosalind Beiler, Amy Larner Giroux, Katherine Faull, Diane Jakacki, Ursula Lehmkuhl and Atiba Pertilla on the theme of “Mobile Lives — Digital Approaches to a World in Motion.” The round-table discussed how digital tools for text mining and network visualization allow for identifying patterns and changes over time in large textual collections such as historical family letters from transatlantic, mainly religiously motivated movements. On the basis of their research projects, the panelists highlighted how this allows for aggregating stories of everyday life that connect the “micro” to the “macro” levels (and vice versa) and for visualizing mobile lives’ trends beyond the illustrative and exemplary. Something that would not have been possible with traditional methods of text analysis, interpretation and presentation, as they argued.

In the evening, the new open access *Journal for Digital History* was officially launched, a collaboration between the C²DH in Luxembourg and De Gruyter Publishers. The journal will be equipped with three full positions and aims to become an innovative platform for publishing digital history research. The journal will introduce new levels of dissemination formats that will provide different angles on a single research topic, ranging from a traditional paper to visualizations of interactive data sets. The first issue is forthcoming in 2021/2022.

The conference's second day started with a panel on "Digital Source Criticism." Tim van der Heijden and Juliane Tatarinov shared their experiences on the Doctoral Training Unit (DTU) "Digital History and Hermeneutics," a four-year interdisciplinary research and training project funded by the Luxembourg National Research Fund (FNR). By conceptualizing the DTU as a "trading zone" in digital history, they reflected on the project's first year, its training program and the project's website as an interactive platform for doing digital hermeneutics in an interdisciplinary setting. Pascal Föhr and Christian Keitel followed with presentations respectively on historical source criticism in the digital age, and the opportunities and constraints on the use of digital-born sources from an archivist's perspective. Their presentations also underscored the need for professional historians to engage more with the experience of digital archivists and librarians who are at the forefront of the digital turn in heritage work. The discussion at the end of the panel touched on a wide variety of issues. For instance, how does the digital turn affect the relationship between historians and archivists? Are private institutions a valid alternative? What does it mean when historians are becoming producers of their own digital archives? How to validate the integrity of a digital source or object? To what degree is digital history becoming a new discipline in its own right, or should we consider the digital to be an extension to the traditional historical discipline?

The question what the Digital ("the D") does — and subsequently the question of what "the H" (history/humanities) does — was a recurring topic throughout the conference. One preliminary observation was that "the D" brings the humanities back in contact with each other and also invites the social sciences and sciences to join the dialogue. After a short panel on digital history funding on both sides of the Atlantic, this topic became especially significant in the panel on digital and transmedia storytelling, which included presentations by digital history pioneers Edward L. Ayers and William G. Thomas III. Ayers and Thomas reflected on their collaborative work in the digital public history project "Beyond the Valley of the Shadow," and discussed the possibilities of digital storytelling for historical narration in relation to some of their current research projects: Mapping Inequality (by the Digital Scholarship Lab) and a reconstruction of an early nineteenth-century enslaved woman, named Anna Williams (<http://annwilliamsfilm.com/>). The panel furthermore included an impressive presentation by Rachel Huber on the question of how digital history can make the narratives of suppressed minorities

visible (in this case female activists of the Red Power movement). Huber provided a powerful example of how retrodigitized “traditional” sources can be combined with born-digital sources, such as various social media, to bring indigenous perspectives into focus and excavate the previously untold. Finally, Sean Fraga presented his views on how to narrate a non-narrative source with digital humanities tools.

The third and final panel of the day, entitled “Modeling the Analogue,” touched upon the epistemological implications of the shift from analogue to digital research methodologies. How can we produce new historical knowledge when modelling or transforming analogue sources and collections into digital datasets for computational analysis and visualization? Torsten Hiltmann presented some reflections on the consequences of data modeling for digital hermeneutics. Comparing analogue to digital methods for knowledge production, he argued that the “analogue” hermeneutic cycle is fundamentally different to the digital research process. While in the analogue realm one can always go back to the sources and re-read or re-interpret them, in the digital process you can often only go back to the data, and the data models we use determine the information from the sources we have at our disposal and thus the questions we can ask. Hiltmann consequently advocated for a digital hermeneutics, which makes transparent and explicit the conceptual work done in data modeling.

Lodewijk Petram and Sebastiaan Derks made a similar argument based on a case study on different usages of a specific “fuzzy and complex” historical data collection containing information about careers of sailors of the Dutch East India Company. The complexity of historical datasets — and the data curation effort which is required to make them usable for analysis — is often overlooked by digital historians and seldomly explicated in their publications, which is problematic. Peter Logan and Jane Greenberg presented how they worked with historical controlled vocabularies (HIVE) for mapping the history of knowledge in their Nineteenth-Century Knowledge Project. Finally, Simon Donig reflected in his presentation on the use of artificial intelligence for the historical disciplines and the epistemological challenges of machine learning he faced in his Neoclassica research project.

Two more panels were held on the third and final conference day. The first of these, entitled “The Challenge of the Collection,” started with a presentation by Sarah Oberbichler, who discussed the ways in which she and her colleague Barbara Klaus used digitized historical

newspapers to study return migration to Europe (1850-1950) in their NewsEye project, and the interface challenges they ran into and how these shaped the research. Among others, she emphasized the importance of metadata and full transparency about OCR quality of digitized text corpora for working with such interfaces. Anne Heyer presented her research within the framework of the EU Horizon 2020-funded TRANSPOP project (Juan March Institute, Universidad Carlos III Madrid) on the changing meaning of “the masses” in nineteenth-century Europe from a transnational perspective, also using digitized newspaper corpora. Achim Saupe reflected on the possibilities and limitations of DiaCollo as a digital tool for “blended reading” (combining distant and close reading) and analyzing semantic changes in the GDR press.

The conference’s final panel discussed the topic of visual hermeneutics: how to use digital tools for the visualization of historical accounts and (audio-visual) presentation of historical analyses? Micki Kaufman presented her PhD research project “Quantifying Kissinger,” which deploys the possibilities of virtual reality tools for the analysis, visualization and historical interpretation of the Digital National Security Archive’s Henry A. Kissinger correspondence. Kaufman argued that VR allows for new forms of engaging with the archive and navigating historical sources in more direct, spatial and playful ways. Silke Schwandt, who reflected in her presentation on the question how productive digital tools are for historians, likewise emphasized the potential of visualization for historical analysis, interpretation and dissemination. Coming back to the question of what “the D” does in historical research practice, she argued that digital technologies allow for new ways of interacting with the source material, new forms of storytelling and accessibility, and as such can provide new perspectives on the historical subject (i.e. zooming in and out, navigating through time and space). This potential was also illustrated in the final presentation by Rosalind Beiler and Amy Giroux, who focused on the affordances of Gephi for the interactive and dynamic visualization of complex early modern communication networks. The concluding discussion — a dialogue between Alan Liu, Tim Hitchcock and Jessica Otis, moderated by Simone Lässig — took Liu’s recent book *Friending the Past: The Sense of History in the Digital Age*, as its point of departure in a wide-ranging debate. The ensuing discussion highlighted that the digital, besides offering new possibilities for historical research, also comes with new challenges, or something Schwandt called “productive irritation.” Andreas Fickers

subsequently argued that it is exactly this productive irritation or “creative uncertainty” we should take as point of departure for our investigation as digital historians. Instead of reproducing certainties, digital tools and methods should help us to explore, visualize, interpret and sense the past in new ways.

The concluding discussion returned to several crucial points that define the digital turn in historical research. Digital methods can, for instance, accommodate the complex structure of time that cannot be depicted as simply linear or neatly layered. On the other hand, they pose challenges with regard to the transition from “traditional” sources that are heterogeneous, incomplete, complex and imperfect to “cleaned up data” with different scales and materialities. New digital and visual literacies amongst scholars might also bring challenges in the relationship between senior and junior scholars, as Simone Lässig reminded us. Moreover, as Fredd Gibbs pointed out in one of the final remarks of the conference, the added value of the “digital” should not only be investigated within the field. Digital public history projects create new links with industry or cultural heritage partners and create new visibilities for old historical questions. By creating new narrative forms, history as a discipline is being opened up to new audiences and might acquire a new reputation in the public sphere.

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<https://www.c2dh.uni.lu/thinking/transatlantic-perspectives-digital-hermeneutics>