

Editorial: The Status Quo of Digital Humanities in Europe

by Redaktion H-Soz-Kult

The use of computer technology in the humanities has by now a history that spans several decades. It is closely intertwined not only with technical developments such as the advent of IBM's Personal Computer or the success of the World Wide Web, but also with historiographical trends: The „Cliometrics“ of the 1960s and 1970s with their computer-facilitated quantitative analysis of cultural data were related to the dominance of social history at the time, whereas the popularity of Geodata in current research projects may be linked to the Spatial Turn, to give just two examples.¹ The advent of „Digital Humanities“ in the past decade was not a linear story, and one that becomes even more complex when we look at the different turns and paths taken in individual humanities disciplines. Communication services such as mailing-lists (or other 'one-to-many' communication services like twitter) and academic platforms, large digital libraries and archival digitization projects, and databases were dominant features of the most recent layer of Digital Humanities.² In humanities research, computer-facilitated text analysis and quantitative methods have been supplemented by an enormous range of digital tools for manifold research questions, some of them highly individual and others organized in large digital infrastructures.

Today, Digital Humanities are viewed from different perspectives: as an academic subject or discipline with a distinct agenda; as a bundle of research methods; as a communication, information and publication infrastructure; as a practice that changes our epistemologies; or simply

¹See Gerben Zaagsma, On Digital History, in: BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review 128 (2013), 4, pp. 3–29, here p. 8 <<http://www.bmgn-lchr.nl/index.php/bmgn/article/download/9344/9780>> (accessed 16.10.2014), with reference to a study of Daniel Greenstein, Bringing Bacon Home: The Divergent Progress of Computer-Aided Historical Research in Europe and the United States, in: Computers and the Humanities 30 (1996), 5, pp. 351–364.

²See David Berry, Understanding Digital Humanities, Palgrave Macmillan 2012.

as a label to take part in funding programmes.³ Debates arise whether all forms of digitization of our research and teaching can be considered Digital Humanities (which would mean that we are all digital humanists), or whether only systematic and self-reflexive research approaches using expert software that advance our research methodologies should count as Digital Humanities – and where to draw the dividing line between these two areas. Obviously, there is a wide range of qualified answers to this question, and consensus between different disciplines and countries varies widely.

With the process of institutionalization underway or well advanced in numerous European countries, we – the editors of the German information platform for historians H-Soz-Kult – think that a review and evaluation of the evolution of Digital Humanities in Europe is a timely task. Founded in 1996 before the current „boom“ of Digital Humanities, H-Soz-Kult is one of the projects that have shaped the landscape of Digital Humanities in Germany. In our loose series of Discussion Forums on matters pertaining to current research and infrastructure in the humanities, we now start the publication of a series of essays on „The Status Quo of Digital Humanities in Europe“. We invited colleagues who are actively involved in the Digital Humanities – as scholars, researchers, university teachers, programme administrators – to contribute to our discussion forum and are glad that a number of prolific colleagues accepted this invitation.

While digital services, databases and many of the scholarly debates and controversies in Digital Humanities are explicitly international (often with a noticeable Anglophone bias), the infrastructural component in Europe is just as often organized along national lines, for nationally or phonetically distinct communities or national infrastructural institutions and discussion networks. At the same time, the European Union funding schemes insert a transnational component. The picture

³For one concise perspective, see Jeffrey Schnapp, Todd Presner, Peter Lunenfeld and Commentators, A Digital Humanities Manifesto?, „The Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0.“ <<http://manifesto.humanities.ucla.edu/2009/05/29/the-digital-humanities-manifesto-20/>> (16.10.2014).

that emerges is one of a field with multi-layered, complex patterns of interaction and institutionalization. While we acknowledge the international character of the scholarly debate, we have chosen to approach the topic from a national and regional, comparative perspective. We hope that such an approach may help bridge the current information gap between the better-known situation in some countries and the lesser-known situation in other countries, taking up a (wider-ranging) critique about „centres“ and „peripheries“ that has been voiced in Digital Humanities debates for some time.⁴

The diverse situations in different countries and the expanding definition of Digital Humanities required a discussion framework that is rather open, yet at the same time allows for meaningful comparisons and a loose common theme. We therefore did not envision such a thing as completeness in the contributions, but invited the authors to write a general overview of the history of Digital Humanities in their countries, focusing on the last two decades and set their own priorities. But we also asked to pay attention to a few more specific questions. These questions ranged from asking about „pioneers“ of Digital Humanities; catalyzing events which had major influence on the developments of the academic disciplines; and the role historians played in this process, while acknowledging the interdisciplinary nature of Digital Humanities. We were interested in the role specific institutions play today, and who they are: university departments or centres, large libraries, professional associations, national ministries (of science, education), or national research councils. How is the connection to European Union programmes or other international donors? And what is the influence of electronic communication services for the integration of the historical discipline and its subdisciplines? Additionally, we asked our authors about methodologies and curricula in their countries.

With these questions, we invited the contributors to our discussion series to tell the story of Digital Humanities in very different Euro-

⁴Susan Schreibman, Digital Humanities: Centres and Peripheries, in: Manfred Thaller (ed.), *Controversies around the Digital Humanities: An Agenda*, in: *Historical Social Research* 37 (2012), 3, pp. 46–58.

pean countries, and we also invited them to offer a characterization of Digital Humanities and contextualize them in the wider fields of humanities and historical disciplines. Controversial discussion about the scope, content and definition has always been intertwined with agenda settings and therefore with funding issues of research and infrastructure. It does not surprise that in this situation definitions of what Digital Humanities is and is not, have a wide ranging spectrum and of course a critical group of researchers who point to the ideological and „dark“ sides of the debate, which often refers to false promises of Digital Humanities.⁵ We asked our authors to take part in the controversies in Digital Humanities that emanate from the current situation.⁶ What is, in their point of view, the dominant feature of Digital Humanities – access to (more) information, or a new set of analytical methods allowing for new research questions and interests? Has the abundance of digital material been met by the development of research methodologies? Are the humanities limiting their analytical power by neglecting the critical development of new research methods and tools? Are we putting the cart before the horse? And how does the majority of historians react to the challenge of Digital Humanities? How do or potentially can Digital Humanities change the way we conduct our research, not just in our daily routines, but in the individual specificity of our methodologies or epistemological interests? Should we consider computing as a new fundamental cultural skill that should have its place in all humanities teaching?

We are thankful that scholars from different countries answered our call with very informative texts. The essays provide a nuanced picture of the developments in Digital Humanities in Europe. While the future

⁵For example: Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *The Dark Side of the Digital Humanities – Part 1* | Thinking C21, Thinking C21. Center for 21st Century Studies, January 9, 2013. <http://www.c21uwm.com/2013/01/09/the-dark-side-of-the-digital-humanities-part-1/> (16.10.2014).

⁶Manfred Thaller, *Controversies around the Digital Humanities: An Agenda*, in: *Historical Social Research* 37 (2012), 3, pp. 7–23, here p. 11. Other recent publications around these debates are: Matthew K. Gold (eds.), *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, Minneapolis 2012.

development of Digital Humanities is rather open and we did not aim at a complete overview of all European countries (a rather ambitious task), there are at least two results that can be condensed from the essays. One is that national projects often connect to older non-digital research projects and infrastructures for the humanities, but more often than not quickly connect with European Union research infrastructures. A second result is that despite the differences in European countries, a number of parallel developments can be discerned from the different stories assembled in this series.

Our series begins today with Thomas Nygren's, Anna Foka's and Philip I. Buckland's essay on Digital Humanities in Sweden. Over the course of the next three weeks, it is followed by Daniel Alves's assessment of Portuguese Digital Humanities and Joris van Zundert's and Karina van Dalen-Oskam's essay on the Netherlands. Helen Gardikas-Katsiadakis gives an overview of Digital Humanities in Greece, Irina Garskova writes about the situation in Russia, and Eliane Kurmann together with Enrico Natale presents the Swiss case. Paul Spence and Elena Gonzalez-Blanco contribute an essay on Spanish Digital Humanities, and Jurij Hadalin writes on the case of Slovenia. Espen S. Ore provides an overview of Norwegian Digital Humanities, and Rüdiger Hohls writes about the history of Digital Humanities in Germany.

We hope that you enjoy reading our series. You can also find the published essays on our discussion forums website:

<<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/index.asp?pn=texte&id=2535>>

For the editors of H-Soz-Kult
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