

Contemporary history in the digital age

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The aim of the 'Contemporary history in the digital age' symposium that took place in October 2009 in Luxembourg was to identify new elements which would provide contemporary historians with a better understanding of the digital tools and methods available to them, both at the present time and in the future. This issue was explored through two keynote addresses given by experienced digital humanities specialists — MARIN DACOS (Marseille/Paris), and GINO RONCAGLIA (Viterbo), an Italian philosopher who has been working in the field of new technologies for 20 years — along with contributions from participants selected by a committee of experts after the issuing of a call for contributions. Seven major themes emerged from the contributions and debates (we have partly based our report on the very detailed summary report by PATRICK PECCATTE (Paris), one of the participants in the conference¹).

Firstly, the field of Digital Humanities comprises a number of extremely varied initiatives, creating an 'archipelago', to coin the term used by Marin Dacos. ALAIN MICHEL and SHADIA KILOUCHI (Paris) demonstrated how the 3D reconstruction of a Renault plant can help provide a better understanding of the adoption of assembly line techniques in Europe. AURORE FRANCOIS (Louvain) offered a technical and methodological description of the online publication of data on Belgian magistrates as an aid to the work of legal experts and historians. GENARO OLIVEIRA (Auckland) emphasised the use of software, particularly graphics software, for teaching purposes. MARIE-PIERRE BERNARD (Caen) explained the benefits of information and communication techniques in connection with new trends in museography. GERBEN ZAAGSMA (London) described the web's contribution to research on contemporary Jewish history. TITO MENZANI (Bo-

logna) highlighted the lack of awareness of available online resources among researchers specialising in the study of the Italian cooperative movement. DAVID BODENHAMER (Indianapolis) emphasised the new educational and research implications of the spatialisation of history and the increasing use of geographic information systems. This wide diversity, both in terms of the subjects and techniques discussed, shows great potential but also raises the question of the interoperability of data (Marin Dacos). MILAGROS GARCIA PEREZ (A Coruña) and CRISTINA BLANCO SIO-LOPEZ (A Coruña/Luxembourg) nevertheless brought some elements of response to the challenge of the archipelago with the example of the Local Studies Library in A Coruña (BMEL), which, although it promotes local history through various digital techniques, is now focusing its attention on the creation of a pan-European portal for local studies of the complex construct known as 'Europe'. The dynamism of this field also gives the impression that there is a growing gap between the digital practices of a minority of researchers and 'traditional' higher education, an idea which was raised by ENRICA SALVATORI (Pisa).

Secondly, much attention was focused on the fundamentals of history as a discipline. The digital methods and tools available to researchers will lead to major changes in the discipline of history (Gino Roncaglia on Web 2.0 tools and researchers), but will strengthen the basis of our methodology, namely, critical distance — RENÉ LEBOUTTE (Luxembourg), who chaired the session, particularly emphasised this point — and the interpretation of sources, particularly important to the eyes of ÉLODIE NOWINSKI (Paris) who works on the history of rock and fashion. There will nevertheless be considerable transformations, particularly resulting from qualitative changes in certain sources such as the press (ANNICK BATARD, Paris) and from the use of Web 2.0 platforms to enhance historians' methods (Gino Roncaglia) or improve sources (Patrick Peccatte and the PhotosNormandie project).

¹ <<http://blog.tuquoque.com/post/2009/10/20/Compte-rendu-symposium-Histoire-Luxembourg>> (13.04.2010).

Thirdly, according to Marin Dacos and OLIVIER LE DEUFF (Lyon) historians will need to acquire a culture which embraces information technology and become accustomed to working with IT specialists, to avoid technicians 'taking over' (Marin Dacos). However, Élodie Nowinski referred to this idea in terms of cultural transfers, preferring to speak more generally of an acculturation: we need to envisage a process whereby historians acquire an information technology culture which is as yet unfamiliar to them. PHILIPPE RYGIEL (Paris)'s contribution went some way towards illustrating the risks associated with digital projects or the digital aspects of research projects. He attempted to shed light on the reasons why the digital aspects of the study on 'History and memories of immigration within France's regions' were not particularly successful: the files collected had not undergone a process of quality control, the study was weakened by its complex environment (there were around 15 partners), technicians and historians did not communicate between themselves to a sufficient extent, and the researchers were more interested in publishing a book or an article than a joint database. He went on to describe elements which might enable such a situation to be avoided; these include a data entry validation procedure, mediation between the various professions involved and safeguards if partners do not fulfil their commitments. He concluded above all that 'the server does not create a society': in other words, the social organisation behind a digital project is particularly important. In conclusion, as Enrica Salvatori, Élodie Nowinski, Marin Dacos and others had done, he emphasised the importance of including statistics and digital methods in humanities teaching.

Fourthly, the rapid growth in digital technologies and their influence on social and human sciences should encourage cooperation between historians, librarians and archivists — all of whom have elements of the expertise needed to use the web in humanities (Olivier Le Deuff) — and should also stimulate a culture of sharing data and sources. Rapid technological development brings with it the very great risk of isolation and of blocking access to data which might be useful for

research. Moreover, as Marin Dacos points out, the use of closed proprietary software may prevent researchers from exchanging data and therefore from working together.

Fifthly, the symposium's participants expressed concern at the verifiability and credibility of sources in the digital era, and the quality of the people involved. This issue is not a new one, but it is taking on new proportions in the Internet age. Nevertheless, methods exist to counter ideological currents which distort history, a point emphasised by TSURIEL RASHI (Jerusalem) and to improve the 'citability' of sources (Marin Dacos), and optimism should outweigh concerns in this field. In this connection, RICHARD HACKEN (Provo) emphasised the importance of making primary sources available online. GREGORY MIURA (Bordeaux) highlighted the need for a 'web archaeology', in other words an auxiliary science to digital documents which particularly helps guarantee the reliability of sources. The contributions of STEFAN HALIKOWSKI-SMITH (Swansea), who compared the digitisation policies of European national libraries, and PAUL ARTHUR (Umea/Canberra), who looked at the case of New Zealand and Australia, introduced a comparative dimension, demonstrating that political support can result in significant differences from one country to another. It also seems to play a role in the question of the quality of sources, as too great a difference from one country to another may undermine the credibility of digitised sources. Stefan Halikowski-Smith nevertheless emphasised that the situation can change rapidly and that there is an increasing desire to digitise cultural heritage in Europe. However, vast disparities remain between France and Italy, for instance.

Sixthly, the mediatisation of history must be rethought. History's relationship with traditional media, online media, museology, libraries and archive centres is being transformed by the use of the Internet. Moreover, to a certain extent, history is also a medium on the Internet, where historians do not have a monopoly; this was demonstrated by the contribution of Patrick Peccatte and the ensuing debate. Patrick Peccatte is an information scientist who has 'redocumentarised' photographs on the 1944 Allied landings in Normandy with

the help of amateur historians; this work led to results of a very high quality.

The last major subject for discussion that was regularly raised concerns the issue of copyright. This question was the focus of the debates which followed many of the contributions, particularly those of Marin Dacos and EVA DEAK (Budapest). Restricted access to certain sources and the possibility of sharing digitised or born-digital sources are questions which cannot be resolved at the present time, given the legislative uncertainty on the subject in many European countries. The contribution of ANDREAS BAGIAS (Luxembourg), at that time a member of the European Parliament Archive and Documentation Centre (CARDOC) but speaking on his own behalf, underlined the justified legal obstacles to the online publication of bodies of archives.

In the end of the symposium, I had, as organizer, the impression that we covered a quite large part of the field of „digital contemporary history“ but that large questions remained open, such as the quality of digitalised/born-digital sources and the elaboration of appropriate methodologies to use those resources. Though historian's work might change, the core of our work – critical distance, interpretation of sources – will be reinforced. Digital history remains today a „work in progress“.

Conference overview:

Keynote addresses

Gino Roncaglia (Web 2.0 tools and researchers)

Marin Dacos (Quelle cyberinfrastructure pour les chercheurs en SHS?)

Ressources et outils

Andreas Bagias (CARDOC) - Organisation et exploitation des archives du Parlement Européen dans un environnement électronique

Annick Batard (Paris XIII) - La presse écrite généraliste française sous l'emprise du web : une ressource de l'histoire culturelle contemporaine?

Eva Deak (Central European University) - Study, store and share unpublished primary sources: the example of the Parallel Archive

Aurore François (Université Catholique de Louvain) - Le portail Just-His.be. Un agréga-

teur de ressources sur l'histoire sociopolitique de l'administration de la justice en Belgique (1795 - 2005)

Stefan Halikowski-Smith (Swansea University) - European National Libraries and Digitization in History

Genaro Oliveira (University of Auckland) - How image editing software and Web development tools currently available on personal computers can be used as interactive/multimedia narrative resources contributing new ways to the writing and communicating of History

Patrick Peccatte (Soft Experience) - Une plateforme collaborative pour la redocumentarisation d'un fonds photographique historique

Méthodes et écritures

Tsuriel Rashi (Lifshitz College of Education) et Isaac HersHKovitz (Bar-Ilan University) - The Media Memory Agenda and the Struggle against Holocaust Deniers

Gerben Zaagsma (University College London) - Contemporary European Jewish history on the internet

Olivier Le Deuff (Lyon 3) - Nouveaux outils et science : l'archéologie pour faire « sens »

Tito Menzani (Università di Bologna) - When the web is useful for scientific output. The case of Italian historiography on the cooperative movement

Stéphane Pouyllau (CN2SV) / Alain Michel (Université d'Évry) - L'atelier C5 de Renault-Billancourt à l'ère digitale: nouvelle histoire d'une chaîne de 1922

Philippe Rygiel (Paris I) - La diffusion du savoir historique à l'âge du web 2.0. La « valorisation » de l'enquête « Histoire et mémoire de l'immigration en régions »

David Bodenhamer (Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis) - The Spatialization of History: A New Web Paradigm

Environnement numérique

Paul Arthur (Umeå University) - Digital History in Australia and New Zealand: An International Comparison

Marie-Pierre Besnard (IUT de Saint-Lô) - Renouveler l'expérience muséale à l'heure du Web: le e-musée

Cristina Blanco Sio-Lopez (CVCE) & Milagros García Pérez (Biblioteca Municipal de Estudios Locales) - Interacting localities: The case of the BMEL and its projects on collaborative on-line library systems for the study of Contemporary History

Gregory Miura (Bordeaux 3/OMNSH) - L'archéologie du web, science auxiliaire d'une histoire du temps présent

Richard Hacken (Brigham Young University) - Online Primary Documentation of Contemporary History: Trends and Changes in the Past Twelve Years

Élodie Nowinski (IEP de Paris) - Last nite De-ezer saved my class

Enrica Salvatori (Università di Pisa) - Listening, watching, living and (at the end) learning history: in and out the web

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