

# Introduction: Integrating Digital Humanities

Julie Birkholz<sup>1</sup> and Gerben Zaagsma<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ghent University, GhentCDH

<sup>2</sup>Université du Luxembourg, C<sup>2</sup>DH

Much ink has been spent, and occasionally spilled, trying to define the Digital Humanities and its place among the academic disciplines. Yet whether it is seen as a field of its own, a sub- or inter-discipline, or a set of practices, most proponents agree on some basic characteristics, with interdisciplinarity probably topping the list. As early as two decades ago, Willard McCarty was among the first to assert that DH constituted an *interdiscipline*, due to its “common ground of method [which] makes it possible to teach applied computing to a class of humanists from widely varying disciplines” (McCarty, 1999). At the same time, DH challenges existing and ingrained research practices (perhaps sometimes more imagined than real), according to which humanities research questions must always derive from domain knowledge, by proposing new data- and method-driven approaches to research in the humanities.

In practice, Digital Humanities projects typically involve, and bring together, a variety of practitioners from different backgrounds: academics from various fields and disciplines, librarians, archivists and museum experts. All of this could easily be construed as providing evidence of the existence of some sort of shared field; yet the influence of the digital on the various phases of our research practice (whether information gathering, processing, analysis and dissemination) comes in many forms: sometimes it is obvious, sometimes it is tacit and implicit, and sometimes aspirational. It is, however, precisely this observed (potential for) intersection that can also cut both ways: “[the danger is] that digital humanities may [...] become ghettoised rather than further integrated into scholarship” (Warwick et al., 2007). That might sound almost absurd in an age when many countries and regions, especially in Europe and North America, hold annual DH conferences, with the most recent international DH conference of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations in Utrecht (the Netherlands) attracting over 1,000 participants.<sup>1</sup> Thus we would like to argue here that, both intellectually and practically, integration is not only Digital Humanities’ most defining feature but also its most pressing imperative.

Yet for those working in the field it might be all too easy to forget that much work remains to be done to truly integrate digital approaches into the humanities, in both teaching and research. Integration, then, implies bringing together and encouraging productive collaboration between humanities and computer science researchers, as

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://adho.org/>

well as heritage professionals. It also means encouraging people to acquire expertise beyond their own professional field, and recognising that the answer to the question of how much expertise and cross-disciplinary knowledge is necessary depends, among other things, on the project(s) at hand, the profile of the participants involved, and the distribution of tasks among them. Integration also means expanding one's own methodological repertoire and established ways of argumentation. It means integrating new practices and/or materials in research and teaching. Finally, integration means consciously working towards a situation where digital and humanities go hand-in-hand, instead of one being promoted at the expense of the other. A blind emphasis on digital methods that loses sight of what contribution these methods actually make to humanistic knowledge misses the point, and inhibits their uptake. Conversely, promoting a humanities in which 'digital' is seen as tainting its seemingly unique character, ignoring the latter's methodological value and the fundamental ways in which our engagement with the human record is changing, is similarly harmful.

Today, it is as common to find a misplaced ignorance of the digital among some 'traditional' humanists ("misplaced," since the digital affects every human and humanist) as it is to find a misplaced, condescending attitude and/or naive ignorance of the humanities among some digital humanists. In order for DH to be(come) integrated as a field, it also means putting aside preconceptions and assumptions and recognising the fields represented by those working in DH. Some digital humanists might be tempted to despair of 'pesky Luddites' who refuse to see the digital light, but it is high time for DH practitioners to frame their work in terms of its broader contribution to and integration into humanities and heritage work, whether that contribution is about domain knowledge, method development, software and code work, or data and tool development. Only by deliberately emphasising both the digital and the humanities can we hope to achieve this.

One may, of course, ask if there is an imperative to do so. The answer to that question is two-fold and relates both to our current state of affairs and to future possibilities. To begin with, the humanities are already touched by 'the digital' in manifold ways. All phases of the humanities research process are somehow impacted by the digital; yet how, and to what extent, that is the case, needs to be questioned. Furthermore, DH is often equated with data and tools, with scale and technology; 'big data' especially seems to define digital humanities in the eyes of many humanists, to the detriment of paying attention to the changes taking place in the research practices of humanities scholars in general. But technology equals methodology and thus directly influences the way in which we as scholars conduct our research. Scholars and DH practitioners need to be able to make informed choices as to the affordances and pitfalls of implementing digital approaches, tools and methods. If separating digital from humanities is already rather nonsensical in light of the above, a look at the future of the human record provides ample proof of the need to consciously engage with the digital (Brügger and Milligan, 2018). A prime example here is the shift from paper to web archives and the fundamental changes this will bring, and is already bringing, to conducting research into human history and culture.

With this in mind, we, as the scientific chairs and guest editors of this inaugural issue, decided upon the theme of "Integrating Digital Humanities" for the DH Benelux 2018 Conference, and we asked our peers and colleagues to reflect, in a critical and self-reflexive way, on how the digital turn affects knowledge production and dissemination in the humanities and heritage sectors. This inaugural issue of the Digital Humanities Benelux Journal features a selection of papers that were presented at the

fifth annual DH Benelux Conference<sup>2</sup>, held at the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Submissions ranged from history, linguistics, literature and cultural heritage to spatial humanities, digital born data, media and DH infrastructure to reflections and debate on DH, resulting in 59 short papers, 36 long papers, 9 round tables, 9 demos and 20 posters. The conference, like this first issue of the DH Benelux Journal, seeks to be a reflection of the diverse and wide community of DHers and DH research not only in and of the Benelux – Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg – but also beyond these borders.

The four articles selected for this issue highlight different aspects of the broader question of integration in the digital humanities. The question of integration in the context of the encounter between different disciplines in DH is addressed by Max Kemman in his essay on “boundary practices of digital humanities collaborations”. Based upon his recent study of trading zones in digital history, and the observation that collaboration across disciplines is inherent to the digital humanities, Kemman questions how this plays out on the intersection of the humanities and computer science. With the aim to “provide empirical grounding for discussions of digital humanities as a meeting between the computational domains and the humanities”, Kemman analyzed an online survey, which was answered by 173 scholars, and found that there is often little disciplinary diversity of digital humanities collaborations, with humanities scholars dominating the collaboration, while there is often a large physical distance between the collaborating partners.

Concluding that “digital humanities collaborations are biased towards the humanities, rather than a balancing of the digital and the humanities”, Kemman proposes that this is due to the fact that humanities scholars, not computer scientists, are setting the agenda for research collaborations. As a result, it seems that many scholars retain their disciplinary ‘home’ culture, instead of going interdisciplinary and entering a distinct ‘third, in-between space’ of digital humanities. Kemman’s work provides those working in DH not only with a comprehensive analysis of how collaboration in DH works, but also with a set of propositions for advancing distinct cross-disciplinary practices.

The second article by Krista Murchison and Ben Companjen highlights the necessary integration of data preparation and curation practices in DH research in general, and the collaboration of librarians and researchers in a specific project in particular. In their article “Manuscripts, Metadata, and Medieval Multilingualism: Using a Manuscript Dataset to Analyze Language Use and Distribution in Medieval England”, Murchison and Companjen focus on identifying multilingualism in medieval society through text. Their essay entails the first large-scale quantitative analysis of the distribution of French texts in medieval England. In providing a framework for quantitative manuscript-based analysis, the authors reflect on the methodology and digital approach rather than the project’s specific sociolinguistic findings, though some analytical results are discussed. Analyzing 958 French manuscripts from medieval England, Murchison and Companjen detail a semi-automatic approach to cataloguing the manuscripts: manually categorising manuscripts and combining this manuscript description data with a machine-actionable, reusable, and interoperable format to calculate the distribution of languages in each manuscript. Their work provides evidence for the persistence of French among both lay and clerical audiences and challenges the master narrative of the ‘triumph’ of English, while highlighting medieval England’s multifaceted intercultural exchanges. This paper should be seen as a gold standard for

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://2018.dhbenelux.org>

future DH papers and the quest for integration – combining great clarity in writing, excellent documentation of the approach ensuring valid and reliable reuse, and clear and explicitly stated contributions to the domain knowledge and methods.

The third paper, by Roel Smeets, Eric Sanders and Antal van den Bosch, on “Ranking Characters in Present-Day Dutch Literary Fiction” seeks to integrate data and domain knowledge driven approaches as well as qualitative and quantitative analysis. Combining network analysis with narratology, the authors assessed the demographic metadata of 2,137 characters from a corpus of 170 contemporary Dutch novels, extracting the social networks of characters from each novel and ranking the characters’ relations on five centrality metrics. Next, they assessed if there is a relationship between demographic variables and a character’s position in the generated network. This resulted in the finding that immigrant and female characters score higher on a number of measures, suggesting that this approach to character centrality, compared to traditional narrative approaches, enhances our understanding of the relations between characters in novels. Smeets, Sanders and van den Bosch’s work builds on a trend to automate character relations in text, as well as on the use of network measures to explain narratives in new ways. Their work also contributes to Digital Literary Studies by integrating data-driven approaches to networks into analyses of literary texts.

Finally, in the fourth article in this issue, Sergio Peignier and Patricia Zapata seek to integrate data mining and semio-pragmatic discourse analysis into the traditionally small-data-based study of political rhetoric. In their “Analysis of Fidel Castro Speeches Enhanced by Data Mining”, they propose a data mining technique for examining speeches and show how a hybrid discourse analysis methodology provides a more comprehensive way of understanding possible discursive strategies, compared to previous work that has largely been limited by corpus size. In conclusion, they argue that the framework presented in their paper could be integrated as a valuable complementary analysis tool into the rapidly growing and highly relevant field of study of populist rhetoric.

The papers presented in this first issue of the DH Benelux Journal reflect and highlight various aspects of the state of integration of the Digital Humanities, by adapting and developing tools and approaches around specific domain-centred as well as data-driven research questions, and by developing and reflecting upon more specific (digital) pipelines that reflect specific methods. Moreover, the last three papers are excellent examples of the collaboration practices that characterize the field, as documented by Kemman in the first paper in this issue. These essays and the ongoing research that will be documented in future issues of the DHBenelux Journal speak to currently evolving practices of integration in the Digital Humanities. They confirm that the work of integration is indeed already being done on a daily basis, and has been done so for years. It is high time to consciously engage with the question of integration, not only as practice between collaborators, but as a vision and program for how the Digital Humanities (can) complement our understanding of the human condition.

### **Guest editors of DH Benelux Journal**

Julie M. Birkholz, Ghent Centre for Digital Humanities, Department of Literary Studies, Ghent University, Belgium

Gerben Zaagsma, Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C<sup>2</sup>DH), University of Luxembourg

## References

Brügger, N. and I. Milligan

2018. *The SAGE Handbook of Web History*. SAGE Publications Limited.

McCarty, W.

1999. Humanities computing as interdiscipline. <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/hcs/mccarty.html>. [Accessed: 4 Sept. 2019].

Warwick, C., M. Terras, P. Huntington, and N. Pappa

2007. If you build it will they come? The LAIRAH study: Quantifying the use of online resources in the arts and humanities through statistical analysis of user log data. *Literary and linguistic computing*, 23(1):85–102.