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(De)constructing Digital History: scientific argument

What is digital history? The term has been coined since at least 1999 (Ayers, 1999) and was further generalized by 2005 (Lines Andersen 2002, Lee 2002, Cohen & Rosenzweig 2005). Broadly defined, digital history is "an approach to examining and representing the past that works with the new communication technologies of the computer, the internet network, and software systems" (Seefeldt & Thomas 2009). In other words, it describes historical inquiry that is based on primary sources available as electronic data, whether digitized or born-digital, and the narratives that are constructed through such inquiries (Lee 2002).

The rise of digital history is in general perceived as the phase defined by the democratization of the personal computer technology, network applications and the development of open-source software (Thomas 2004, Cohen & Rosenzweig 2005, Graham, Milligan & Weingart 2015). With slight differences in periodization, medium-centered (e.g. relying on the use of the computer) genealogies see digital history at least partly as a descendant of quantitative and computational history, tracing its beginnings through the end of the 40s to the 60s (Thomas 2004, Graham, Milligan & Weingart 2015). Broader approaches insist instead on the heritage of public and oral history (Noiret 2011, Scheinfeldt 2014). Digital history participated greatly to the rise and development of the field of digital humanities since the mid-2000s (Schreibman et al. 2004, Kirschenbaum 2010, Gold 2012). However, specific disciplinary objects, sources and approaches continue to be present within the connected use of methods and tools that takes place under the digital humanities big tent. A typology of digital history projects identifies three main fields: academic research, public history, and pedagogy projects, of which the last two categories are considered particularly specific to historians within the digital humanities field (Robertson 2016).

We therefore propose to address digital history through this triple spectrum: academic research, public history, and pedagogy, in order to trace continuities and transformations in history as a discipline; and

contribute to explore the broader digital humanities field through this case study.

1/ Academic research

It is understood that scholarly research in history has been affected by the digitization of sources, methods and the environment in which research is conducted, produced and disseminated (Clavert & Noiret 2013). Nonetheless, there also seems to be a tension between the potentiality of digital history and the actual delivery of argument-driven scholarship (Blevins 2016). In the last two decades, a significant number of digital history projects have been elaborated and, furthermore, digital history has been institutionalized through the creation of specialized departments in several universities. We should then be able to identify the impact of mutations in the ways historical research is driven and communicated, on the one hand; the novelties in objects, methods and analysis tools, and the eventual issues they raise, on the other.

In this sense, what is called the data revolution (Kitchin 2014) is one important component to take into account and to explore further. The massive production of digitized/born-digital historical data challenges historians' existent approaches and methods of research and analysis, as recent debates on the *longue durée* approach have shown (Guldi & Armitage 2014, *Annales* 70 2/2015) or the transnational turn (Putnam 2016), just to mention a few. Moreover, it raises issues on how historians relate with present time and what their role is in digital preservation matters as showcase social media and other web-based ephemeral data (Webster 2015, Rosenzweig 2003). What is essentially at stake is inter-/transdisciplinary cooperation, even the dependency of history on input from other disciplines, whether from human, social or computer science (computational linguistics, visual analytics...), engineering, library and information science. Indeed, the use of connected methodologies as historians adopt new epistemologies (data mining and visualization, GIS, encoded critical edition), sheds light on the need to adapt historians' literacy through the development of a shared culture with computer science and mathematics (Genet 1986, Lamassé & Rygiel 2014).

Furthermore, the ecology of scientific data raises some important interdisciplinary issues related to their collection, storage, archiving, dissemination and the correspondent infrastructures. What kind of scientific sovereignty can be exercised once data storage and infrastructures are externalized, and what is its impact on access and sustainability of scientific research and its output? How can disciplinary needs for effective organization and description of historical information be met (e.g. specific ontologies) in a global environment of structured interoperable data? Moreover, old problems of biases concerning the access of primary sources are updated as the result of digitization and its possible impact on availability or, instead, underrepresentation of certain types of archives (Putnam 2016, Milligan 2013). Let's consider, for example, the impact of institutional

decision-making and constraints (such as financial ones) on the digitization of sources, new actors in the web ecosystem such as digitization companies, or even digital fractures and inequalities at national and transnational levels, just to evoke some of the most probable biases. Last but not least, one should not forget the biases that algorithms and software can generate during the collection and analysis of historical data.

2/ Digital history and public history

From a vast literature on the synergies between digital and public history (see Noiret 2011, Cauvin 2016), we chose to focus on topics that shed light on the blurred frontiers between public and scholarly history, especially the osmosis between scholars, cultural heritage institutions, private sector and citizens. From this point of view, we propose to explore three main thematic unites. First, ways in which technology is used in the cultural heritage sector in order to engage the public with history: uses of social media, augmented and virtual reality, development of tools for the public to explore patrimonial data and collections, game industry and history, private sector digitization and engagement with history... Second, historical memory and the way it emerges at individual, collective and institutional levels to show using facts the relation of people to history and the multiple ways the present affects the perception of the past. Finally, the documentation of present-time events that actually builds primary sources and archives for future historians: crowdsourced archives, social and political movements documentation (such as Spanish 15M, Nuit débout, Women's March), political uses of technology (social media propaganda, institutional use of social media, political use of game industry as in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict etc). How is authority conceived and how does the role of historian persist in such diversified multi-actor contexts?

3/ Pedagogy

During the last few years, several digital history departments have been created in various universities in different countries. Furthermore, even in traditional history departments, teaching now integrates components of digital culture or associated skills. There are specialized tutorial blogs ([The Programming Historian](#), [La boîte à outils des historiens](#)) providing for skill transfers between historians; digital transdisciplinary schools (such as the [Digital Methods Initiative](#) of the University of Amsterdam); an array of online services or/and software for one to easily explore and analyze data (Düring et al. 2011, [Nodegoat](#), [AnalyseSHS](#)...). However, few systematic approaches allow to have an overall view of how historians get on with the digital transformations of their profession (Heimburger & Ruiz 2011) and even less from a transnational perspective. How are historians to teach digital history in these contexts and how are traditional and DH teaching articulated? What skills and methods do teachers need to develop for themselves, in order to teach them, and for their students to acquire them? How to better fit teaching to

specific research interests so that students are able to acquire a method than simply become able to manage tools (Mahoney, Pierazzo 2012)? How are modules organized and how do students react to the teaching of digital history? How can a minimum skillset be defined in order to assure research of an acceptable quality and corresponding level publications but also a balance between a historian's basic training and the acquisition of this skillset? Although there have been works developing the discussion (and solutions) regarding mainly the web resources (Cohen, Rosenzweig 2006), there is less focus on the ways interdisciplinarity is embedded in digital history teaching and even less on how to deal with born-digital data (e.g. social media data) use and analysis as primary sources for historians in specific modules.

Possible areas of interest for proposals include, but are not limited to, the following:

Academic research

Natural language processing and text analytics applied to historical documents

Applications of GIS

Social Network Analysis

Image analysis

Analysis of longitudinal document collections

Entity relationship extraction, detecting and resolving historical references in text

Digitizing and archiving

Applications of Artificial Intelligence techniques to History

Handling uncertain and fragmentary text and image data

OCR and transcription

Epistemologies in the Humanities and Computer Science

Novel techniques for storytelling

Historical ontologies

Historical data management and infrastructures

Software and applications development

Digital public history

Museums and exhibiting the past

Oral history and community projects

Digital media, the Internet and participatory knowledge

Moving images and documentaries

Re-enactments and living history

Historic preservation and community cultural heritage

Public archaeology

Social media, mobile app and user-generated contents

Public policies and applied history

Historical memory construction and the Web

Teaching public history

Pedagogy

Introduction of digital research methods in classrooms

Designing digital history curricula

Digital teaching materials
Digital media as alternative to text-based student theses and research papers
Methods for digital student assessment
Teaching digital literacy
Teaching the history of the “Digital Age”
Digital history teaching commons

Proposals (up to 1000 words) can be submitted until **May 31, 2017** in English or in French. All proposals will be considered. Travel expenses can receive financial support. For further questions please contact **dhnord[at]meshs[dot]fr**

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