

Chapter 41

Digital Methodologies for the Historiography of the History of Europe: Testing Omeka Software on the “AsE”

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ABSTRACT

Within the historiography of history of Europe in the 20th century, it can be observed that the methodologies are mostly structured on archival research and comparative methods. Currently, the digital revolution has enabled the management of large amounts of data, information, and statistics. The history of historiography could consider the innovative methodologies for historical research like the digital humanities. This chapter reports the test of Omeka-S, an open-source content management system (CMS) specifically designed for humanities studies, on the history of European historiography. Omeka has been applied for the functions of digitisation, metadatation, and geolocation in accordance with international standards. The case study is the Association of European Historians (AsE), a network of historians from several European and non-European countries founded in 1983. The use of Omeka-S, in combination with traditional methodologies and network analysis, allows a more in-depth examination of the AsE's network and its historiographical paradigm.

INTRODUCTION

The paper analyses a methodological approach of the author's PhD project in history of Europe entitled “From history of Europe to Digital Humanities: the Association of European Historians through digital history”. Starting from the description of the heuristic transition from digital humanities to digital history, the present study examines the application of Omeka-S, an open-source Content Management System (CMS) specifically designed for humanities studies, to the historical research. After the illustration of a significant example with regard to the employment of Omeka-S, the paper focuses on the author's case

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study: the Association of European Historians (AsE), a network of historians from several European and non-European countries founded in 1983. Ultimately, the author discusses the added value of the application of Omeka-S to his research project.

From Digital Humanities to Digital History: A Heuristic Approach

The digital revolution has a profound impact on the methodologies for studying, sharing, and teaching history, as well as on the analysis, conservation and production of sources. According to a widespread certainty, the introduction of computing to the humanities has not been met favourably by researchers and scholars. For instance, Boonstra et al. (2006) highlight how the debates on the use of computers in the humanities are frequently characterised by a deep resistance against computing. They affirm that “...at the same time, we can see that, although basic computing skills of word processing, e-mailing and web browsing are nowadays omnipresent among humanities scholars, their methodical and technical skills for computerised research are fairly limited”. Nevertheless, few dispute that digital technology is fundamentally changing the research processes. Indeed, it can be observed that research is increasingly being mediated through digital technology. According to a variety of scholars, the latter mediation is progressively modifying the research, affecting both the epistemologies and the ontologies that underlie a research programme (Ayers, 2001; Schreibman et al., 2004; Berry, 2011; Gold, 2012; Zaagsma, 2013; Sula, Hill, 2017; Fridlund et al., 2020). Arguably, the development of digital technologies depends on disciplines and research methodologies; notwithstanding, it is currently rare to find a humanist who has not access to digital technology as part of its research activity. Whilst some scholars deny the “newness” of digital technologies and decry the loss of skills and techniques of older research traditions (Frisch, 2008; Fish, 2011; Marche, 2012; Liu, 2013; Kim, Stommel, 2018), others have warmly embraced what has come to be called the (DH) digital humanities (Svensson, 2010; Drucker, 2011; Berry, 2012; Hayles, 2012; Ramsay, Rockwell, 2012; Schreibman et al., 2015).

The latter distinction suggests a debate in progress. Thus, it is tempting to consider the focus on the intersection between humanities and digital tools as a recent evolution. However, albeit the discursive transition from “humanities computing” to “digital humanities” in roughly the past decade, narratives on its origins homogeneously date back to 1950s. Most of scholars ground DH in mid-twentieth-century humanities computing (Hockey, 2004; Svensson, 2009; Kirschenbaum, 2010; Dalbello, 2011). The pioneering work of Roberto Busa, Italian Jesuit, linguist and computer scientist, is commonly considered the starting point of computer-aided research in the humanities. In 1949 Busa started his cutting-edge project on a lemmatised concordance of the works of Thomas of Aquino, the so-called *Index Thomisticus*, with the assistance of IBM. Thereafter, in 1962 an international conference entitled “The Use of Computers in Anthropology” took place in Burg Wartenstein, Austria (Hymes, 1965). Two years later, IBM organised a “Literary Data Processing Conference” (Bessinger, 1964), forerunning the dominance of text-based literary and linguistic analysis in the so-called “first wave” of digital humanities (Schnapp et al., 2009; Presner, 2010). The connections between the human-generated work and the move to automated systems for collecting and collating humanities materials is useful to analyse the shift from a predominantly print culture to a digital one. The need for a new conceptual language of tools and archives led to the creation of support systems and semi-standardised software for the archiving and maintaining of textual repositories (Hockey, 2004). The 1970s and 1980s are largely considered as periods of “consolidation” of text analysis methods. As storage and processing capabilities increased from the late 1970s onward, structured electronic text and multimedia archives dominated the field, followed in the 1990s by

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