

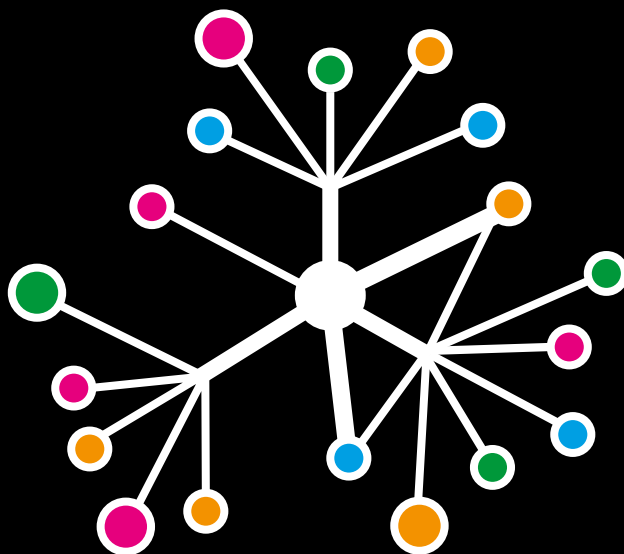
ARKEOS

perspetivas em diálogo

56

**Proceedings
of the
European
Humanities
Conference**
5-7 May 2021

Editors: Luiz Oosterbeek
Rosi Braidotti
Henrique Leitão
Rosário Costa



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Digital Humanism: *the role of the human component in the Digital Humanities*

BY SILVIA ORLANDI

“Digital Humanism”: *the role of the human component in the Digital Humanities*

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Abstract

Recent trends in scholarly publications, public debate on newspapers, and digital projects in the humanities seem to privilege the quantitative and computational approach to historical studies, as it is considered more objective, and therefore more correct. But some examples driven from direct experience, above all in the field of digital epigraphy, show how important the human component of any digital project still is for a whole and more correct comprehension of the traces of the past.

Abstract

Le récentes tendances dans les publications académiques, le débat public sur les médias et les projets numériques en sciences humaines semblent privilégier un approche quantitative et informatique des études historiques, considérée plus objective et, donc, plus correcte. Quelques exemples tirés de l'expérience directe dans le domaine de l'épigraphie numérique montrent, toutefois, la grande importance de l'élément humain envers une compréhension globale et plus exacte des traces du passé.

Keywords

Digital Humanities, Ancient History, Greek and Latin Epigraphy, Digital Humanism / Informatica Umanistica, Storia Antica, Epigrafia Greca e Latina, Umanesimo Digitale

It must be admitted that between the end of the second and the beginning of the third millennium, humanities have lost their traditional central role in the western educational system and, more in general, their social relevance. This is particularly true for the disciplines that have to do with the ancient world, often seen as too far and too different from the contemporary reality. Different approaches have been tempted to face – if not to solve – this problem. On one hand, there is a constant commitment to persuade, with any kind of initiatives, the public opinion that ancient studies are still very important and significant even for a modern and technologically advanced society. Just to quote a couple of random examples, a series of online lectures on the living relations between past and present (“Dialoghi aull’antico e sul presente. Tra identità e alterità”), organized by the scientific journal “Donysus ex machina”, has been released on the website of the publisher Editore Palumbo⁵⁹, while an official and passionate statement on the importance of the inclusion of ancient history in the teaching program of Italian schools, by the President of the Association of the university professors of Greek and Roman History (CUSGR: Consulta Universitaria per la Storia Greca e Romana), was recently published on the online journal “Huffington post”⁶⁰.

But at the same time, as a result of this process, and maybe also with the hope to fill the gap between scientific and humanistic studies, recent trends in scholarship publications, public debate on newspapers, and digital research projects tend also to privilege the quantitative and computational approach to the humanities in general, and to historical disciplines in particular, as it is considered more objective, and therefore more correct.

⁵⁹ Recordings available at: <https://up.palumboeditore.it/show-details.html?id=29> (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

⁶⁰ Full text available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/caro-cingolani-la-conoscenza-della-storia-non-e-merce-di-scambio-di-l-criscuolo_it_61a3981fe4b07fc2011a6a49?utm_hp_ref=it-homepage (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

It seems – and it has been stated – that only the methodology traditionally applied to exact sciences can guarantee the objectiveness necessary to consider an historical research reliable, otherwise “history gets things wrong” to quote the title of a recent book by Alex Rosenberg (Rosenberg, 2018).⁶¹

Actually, new directions in the field of ancient history have opened wider and unexpected possibilities for the study of the human past, thanks to the study of climate change, paleobotanic, paleoanthropology, and so on. All this information, put at disposal by recent scientific research, are now to be considered along with traditional ancient sources for a more global approach to the past, as some recent volumes have shown very well. The book by Kyle Harper on the end of the Roman Empire (Harper, 2017)⁶², and the collection of essays edited by Walter Scheidel under the title *The Science of Roman History* (Scheidel, 2018)⁶³ are two good examples of this new turn in historiography.

I also don't deny that the access to a huge quantity of digital material – the famous Big Data – ready to be automatically read and elaborated by a machine thanks to the Artificial Intelligence can not only speed the research process, but also open new and previously unthinkable scenarios. The idea is that increasing in a significant – and at the same time quick and cheap – way the quantity of digital data at our disposal will not only represent a new research tool, but will also generate new research methods and themes, suggested by the amount of the information itself⁶⁴. That's

⁶¹ As a matter of fact, history has often been considered a not very reliable science. See, for example, the words used by Leonardo Sciascia in the Italian novel *Il consiglio d'Egitto*: “Il lavoro dello storico è tutto un imbroglio, un'impostura: e che c'era più merito ad inventarla, la storia, che a trascriverla da vecchie carte, da antiche lapidi, da antichi sepolcri”.

⁶² See also the reviews of Harper, 2017 by Degroot, 2019, Newfield, 2019 and Woolf, 2020. An interview with Kyle Harper on Economics Detective Radio can be also listened on YouTube at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8wnscoMRMQ> (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

⁶³ See also the review of Scheidel 2018 by Graham, 2019.

⁶⁴ This is, for example, the concept of the European project (and organization) Time Machine: <https://www.timemachine.eu/> (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

why more and more digital research projects, with very good chances to be funded, plan to apply this methodology to different fields of the humanities, including ancient Greek and Latin epigraphy, that is my area of interest.

Just to give you a single but significant example, a recent study developed by a research team in Oxford, including Jonathan Prag and Thea Sommerschild⁶⁵, has shown the amazing results made possible by the use of Deep Learning techniques to a sample of fragmentary epigraphic and literary texts. The so developed algorithm can generate a number of integration proposals much bigger than a human, or even a scholar's mind, among which the historian will be able to choose the best results, that are not necessarily the most statistically attested, but rather the ones that better fit the historical context. This study makes clear that even in the application of an extremely advanced technology, the human contribution remains fundamental in different phases of the project. First of all, in the “cleaning” of the data that are the starting point of the process, since the problem of low- quality information literally “explodes” with huge amount of digital material as in the case of big data. This phenomenon, that has been already studied in the field of archaeological data, but that is not clear enough to scholars and broad public, means even that behind the most advanced machine there is always a human mind. Moreover, what the machine can do is offering a large number of possibilities, statistically based, that represent an unvaluable help in the decision-making process, but – once again – the last word remains to the human scholar with his knowledge of the historical context.

And other examples, chosen in the field of ancient epigraphy, that, as I said, is my own area of expertise, can show that this is not an isolated case.

⁶⁵ See the full report by Assael, Sommerschild and Prag, 2019 and the general information available at: <https://wiki.digitalclassicist.org/Pythia> (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

EpiSearch is a very ambitious project, whose pilot was recently funded by the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, aiming to a “digital coalescing” of ancient inscriptions and epigraphic manuscripts⁶⁶: the idea is to build a digital environment where encoded epigraphic texts and encoded images of handwritten collection of inscriptions can dialogue and establish cross-references between the two different sets of data. Ideally, an “agnostic model” capable to go beyond singular and specific digital archives is the solution conceived to reach this goal, but practically nothing could happen without a human contribution before and after this step. Before, with a massive digitalization of both manuscripts and inscriptions, and after, with a careful check of the results, that can be improved as long as the expected and unexpected mistakes are spotted and corrected by human eyes and minds.

In fact, Machine reading is actually giving extraordinary results in the automatic recognition and interpretation of texts, but problems arise with ancient texts, as the inscriptions, where there is a frequent use of marks, abbreviations and non-alphabetical signs that sometimes have the same aspect of normal letters, but a different meaning according to the context in which they are used. The machine can learn the difference, of course, just as an image recognition system can learn to distinguish a jaguar – the animal, from a jaguar – the car. But a teaching process presuppose – even in a digital environment, as we have learned in these pandemic times – a human teacher.

For all these reasons, while more and more projects are proposing a computational approach to traditionally humanistic disciplines⁶⁷, a parallel movement is arising, showing how important is the human component of the digital humanities. A human

⁶⁶ A short paper on the concept of the project was presented by Daniele Fusi at the International Workshop “On the Way to the Future of Digital Manuscript Studies”, held at the Radboud University of Nijmegen, 27-29 October 2021. Program available at: https://rmlbf.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/on_the_way_to_the_future_of_digital_mss_studies.pdf (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

⁶⁷ See, for example, the interesting results described by Prignano et al., 2017, or by Bornhofen and Düring, 2020, just to quote a couple of the innumerable possibilities.

component that should not be denied or hidden as a weakness point, but, on the opposite, declared and exploited as a fundamental resource to manage the uncertainty and nuances that characterize our studies. Natural intelligence, with its fallibility, of course, but also with its inevitable capacity of analysis, reflection and criticism is still something that our digital era can't get rid of⁶⁸.

Not by chance, more and more research programs are realizing that without an education that includes the humanities, with the possibility of dealing with complexity and sophistication that a “philological approach” brings with it, it's often difficult to reach good and correct scientific results. In fact, in order to “extract” knowledge from data, seeing the relations among data is not enough: reflecting about the meaning of these relations, to understand them correctly, is also necessary. According to a recent, provocative proposal, the idea of “Digital Humanities” can also be presented as an interpretation (and a criticism, when necessary) of the Information Technology from the point of view of the humanities scholars and their methodological approach.⁶⁹

In the past years, several conferences have been devoted to this theme and different initiatives have been taken in different part of Europe. Just to quote a few examples, a whole conference, organized by the University of Hamburg on July 9 to 10 2020, was devoted to the theme “Modeling Vagueness and Uncertainty in Digital Humanities”⁷⁰, showing that representing the different (and often very low) levels of certainty that characterize above all historiographical information is the new challenge of the digital projects in this research field. Moreover, an official movement is born, called The Digital Humanism Initiative⁷¹, seeking to build

⁶⁸ I have developed some observations on this subject in Orlandi, 2019. Some very interesting thoughts from a philosophical perspective can be found in Gruner, 2021.

⁶⁹ This is the interesting idea that lays behind the recent book by Varanini, 2020.

⁷⁰ A report and the recordings of the talks presented during the conference can be found at: Modelling Vagueness and Uncertainty in DH : hercore : Universität Hamburg (uni-hamburg.de) (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

⁷¹ With a very active website: <https://dighum.ec.tuwien.ac.at/> (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

a community of scholars, policy makers, and industrial players who are focused on ensuring that technology development remain centered on human interests. A regular lecture series organized by this scholarly association ended up in the volume “Perspective on Digital Humanism”, collecting several contributions on the interplay of human and machine.⁷² On the same path, Ammagamma⁷³, an Italian private society working on the application of Artificial Intelligence systems to different kinds of industries, has launched in 2019 a “Manifesto della razionalità sensibile”, presented as a proposal of a humanistic concept of AI, underlining the importance of human awareness in the use of highly technological tools.⁷⁴

Nobody denies that we simply can't step back to the past, but I think that we should also be aware – and arise the awareness – that human intermediation, with its “semantic capital” (to quote Luciano Floridi, who, as Head of the Oxford University Research Group on the Philosophy of Information⁷⁵, has been studying this theme for many years⁷⁶), is still a fundamental component of the building of knowledge, even in a scenario of extreme digital life.

Bio-note

Associate Professor in Latin Epigraphy at Sapienza University of Rome, in the last years Silvia Orlandi has paid much of her attention to technologies applied to epigraphic research.

⁷² Available at: <https://dighum.ec.tuwien.ac.at/perspectives-on-digital-humanism/> (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

⁷³ General information available at: <https://ammagamma.com/> (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

⁷⁴ Full text available at: <https://www.razionalitasensibile.it/it/> (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

⁷⁵ Structure and organization available at: <http://www.cs.ox.ac.uk/activities/ieg/> (Accessed: 31 December 2021).

⁷⁶ See, for example, Floridi, 2014 or the collective volume Floridi, 2015.

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